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A FAT IMPOSTER: THE EMBODIED INTERSECTION BETWEEN RACE, BODY TYPE AND FATNESS IN MARGARET CHO'S COMEDY

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THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistic Theory and Typology in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

A FAT IMPOSTER:
THE EMBODIED INTERSECTION BETWEEN RACE, BODY TYPE AND FATNESS IN MARGARET CHO'S COMEDY

Margaret Cho is a comedic goddess who, in her mockery, serves flaming hot social commentary about race, body image, and fatness. Within this thesis, I used critical discourse analysis to understand how Margaret Cho embodies Asianness, whiteness, and the body types and images prescribed respectively. While working on data analysis, I came across a common media trope of fat women: the use of indexically Southern (United States), Appalachian, and Working class indexicals in speech and lexical items. I connected the ideologies surrounding Southern and Appalachian language to the inequalities that fat women face. This voicing had not previously been written about and I have chosen to call it, "fat voice."

KEYWORDS: body image, race, fat liberation, embodiment, intersectionality, fat voice

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04/23/2021
Date

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DEDICATION

To all of those young girls who don't fit in and never really felt accepted by their peers, feeling invisible and less than.
I was one of you and those experiences will never leave me.
If you're reading this and you say, "but I'm not a girl!" then this is for you too.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

In this thesis, I analyze the embodiment and the intersection between race, body image, and fatness in Margaret Cho's standup routines. I chose two clips to analyze, NotoriousCHO and a short clip from Fresh off the Bloat. I predicted that Margaret Cho would embody, with both her words and her gestures/facial expressions, Parodies of stereotypes as well as body type and I focused much of my analysis on how one's race and body image/body type contributed to Cho's feelings of belongingness and desirability and the greater Discourse about race and fatness. Belongingness implies to what table one is allowed to sit at in society and a feeling of belonging or lack thereof often implies there is some type of discrimination and inequality and that their quality of life is different because they don't have the same sense of community. On a broader scale, belongingness can imply representation and humanization within almost all aspects of a community.

I first present literature related to the field in the sections of Identity and Embodiment, Body image and Fatness, Race and body image, and Humor and Identity. Each section of the literature review provides definitions and details that one might need for full comprehension of the analysis. I then turn to a discussion of my methodology, namely a multimodal discourse analysis. This section includes my list of research questions and hypotheses as well as how the research was done and why Margaret Cho was chosen as my speaker of focus. I conclude with my data analysis. The analysis focuses on three topics: 1) Asianness and body image; 2) whiteness and body image; and 3) fatness, gender, and desirability.

The section on Asianness and body image is subdivided into to sections. In the first, Never Getting Full and Never Getting Fat, I focus on how the mock Korean accent ascribes to her mother indexes Koreanness as well as body image. I then relate what she says about her mother's desire to never get full and never get fat back to her gestures and her prosody to index Asianness and ideal body type. In the second subsection, Asian Bodies On a White Back Drop, I analyze Cho's discourse about the comparison between Asian women and white women, and I discuss how pervasive whiteness and western colonialism is on Asian culture by tying that to skin lightening.

In section two of analysis, I write about Cho's use of mock white girl and how that relates to body image. My first subsection of this section discusses the basis of Cho's mock-white parody and comes to the conclusion that Cho is implying that thin, white women are indexically viewed as ideal in Cho's work. However, because Cho is establishing thin white women as indexically ideal, she is setting them up to make fun of them. In the subsection two, I analyze Cho's embodiment of mock white women and then create an indexical relationship between urbanness, thinness, whiteness, and disordered eating.

In section three of analysis, I chose to go in-depth about fatness and feelings of not belonging or being loved. I draw attention to fat women being seen as indexically less feminine. Then I write about the consequences of not feeling like one belongs because of their weight and discuss eating disorders. Within this section, I have Cho doing a fat voicing in which she monophthongs, g-drops and sounds like a hungry, wild bear. I could not find literature about the voicing of fat women, so I looked at other instances of the voicing of fat women and I found that fat women are often voiced with deeper voices and

southern accents. Because social repetition creates an enregistered identity I related the indexicality of mock southern and mock hillbilly to the common stereotypes and found that these were often negative stereotypes. I was left with the question as to whether or not the negative media portrayals and indexical relationships between their voicing and their gestures might contribute to some of the injustice that fat women face. There was not a linguistic term for the voicing of fat people, more specifically women, so I titled it "fat voice." Finally, within the last subsection of the fatness section, I wrote about liberation and fat acceptance embodied in Cho's work. As a fat woman, I think that it's important that fat women and people have indexically positive and liberating representations of themselves in scholarly work and my thesis is not exempt.

1.2 Positionality Statement

At one point in my life, I regarded being fat as a negative aspect and my fatness as a skidmark on the underpants of society; now, however, I am a bit more "woke"as the youths say and wish to liberate myself and others from the scorn of the ideologies associated with fatness. One should question the difference between *fat* and *fatness*. Fat and fatness are different sides of the same coin and, if I were an ancient philosopher, I would compare them to the difference between *is* and *be*. There IS fat on my body, but the ideologies and feelings BEing attached to my fat are fatness. Fat is a fact; it's generally quantifiable and it is there or it isn't; fatness is the embodiment of fat and includes the way fat is portrayed in everyday life. If I were Plato, I might say that fat is

my body, but fatness is my soul.[1] This means that fatness is pervasive and can exist without fat actually being present; therefore, one can be straight size (or thin) and still have ideologies attached to fatness associated with their bodies.[2]

I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a fat, white, woman who wishes to liberate other fat people from not only self-hatred but to increase awareness of the inequities that fat people live with day to day. I will not use words such as "obese" or "overweight" to talk about the bodies of fat people; there is no way to separate those words from the pathologization and medical dehumanization that fat people deal with in nearly all life settings. I also write this from the perspective of someone who is fat but definitely could be fatter; my bodily proportions are viewed as attractive by many people. While my options of male partners have been limited, as an adult, I have very rarely if ever been in a situation in which my body got in the way of being found desirable. However, I always have to be sure that my dates know that I'm fat and that they're okay with that; in fact, I primarily date fat people and feel very uncomfortable with the idea of dating a thin person. I say this because fatness and desirability are linked together and feeling undesirable or less than is often part of the fat experience. The, "You're pretty, but…" conversation has frequently occurred and, in fact, at one point in my life I

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[1] My father would like to contribute, "fat is the body, but fatness is the shadow on the cave wall" (Reference to The Allegory of the Cave in Plato's Republic, book seven, 375 BCE).

[2] Straight size is a term used by the fat community to create a boundary between what is fat and what is thin; the fat liberation community does not use body mass index. It isn't a perfect metric, but generally anything over a size 12/14 in women's pants and XL onward is considered plus size.. The ranges are small fat, mid-fat, super-fat, and infini-fat. Thin is a term used interchangeably with straight size in this work, but many folks choose not to use it because it has such an association with dieting and body image (thin people may still consider themselves fat).

developed disordered eating and thrived off of the praise that I received for existing in a smaller body. I'm fat and I have always been fat and even if I were to try to lose weight, I would still be fat. Fatness is part of me and I proudly embody who I am as a fat woman each day; I wanted that to shine through in my writing.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It would be unacademic to write that Margaret Cho is a goddess of humor and advocacy for marginalized people—yet that's exactly what Cho is. As the first Asian American (specifically Korean) comedian in standup comedy and the star of the first sitcom about Korean American families, Cho has used her platform to bring attention to issues such as disordered eating, immigrant identity, race, femininity, and how that fits into belonging. This literature review will cover the themes of identity and embodiment, body image and fat studies, race and humor as social commentary and identity construction with a focus on belongingness and identity maintenance.

2.1 Identity & Embodiment

2.1.1 Differing Definitions of Identity

In basic terms, "Identity is the social positioning of self and others" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, 586). This implies that one's identity is the relationship between the way one interacts with others and how one views themselves in regard to others. Theories of identity are drawn from various fields within the social sciences, but the idea of interaction, the social in social science, is how the varying definitions gain social meaning (568). Yet, Bucholtz and Hall (2005), argue that identity not only comprises interaction but is "a discursive construct that emerges in interaction" (587). With this definition of identity, the emergence principle has, in a non-ironic turn of discursive events, emerged. To further reinforce this definition of identity, Bucholtz & Hall theorize that identity cannot exist without social interaction (588). This means that identity is not pre-discursive. Butler would state that within the construction or emergence of one's

identity that identity is not constructed of categories but rather the performance of categories which are generally not determined by agency.

2.1.2 Stance & Identity in Action

Identity is constantly being formed and reinforced by interaction, but it is important to note that interaction involves an interaction with not just people directly but also media. One way to consistently reaffirm one's indexed identity is to take a stance. Simply put, stance is the alignment or disalignment between speakers (Johnstone, 2013). Jaffe states, "The concept of stance is a uniquely productive way to conceptualize the process of indexicalizations that are the link between individual performance and social meaning" (Jaffe, 2009; Goodwin & Alim, 2010). For example, the *Valley Girl Persona,* which will be later expanded upon below, is based on Moon Unit Zappa's song *Valley Girl*, the movie *Valley Girl* and Cher the main character of the film *Clueless* (Paramount Studios, 1995; Goodwin & Alim, 2010).[3] *Valley Girl* has become an enregistered linguistic style used to index a certain persona and belonging in a social group predominantly made up of middle-class white women and teenage girls. Using language such as, *whatever* and *Oh-eM-Gee* (omg!), in this case indexes the intersection of social class, race, and gender, and its usage indicates that the speaker is taking stance as a *valley girl.*

[3] Cher is technically not a valley girl because she is upper-class and not from the San Fernando Valley; however, she is portrayed in the movie using mock-white girl or valley girl speech.

Identity is constantly forming, but not every aspect of one's identity has to line up, according to Barrett (2017, 89),

> The meaning of social identity categories is founded on a set of attributes and interactional stances that members of a category are assumed to possess or display. Although any given individual may not display all of the attributes associated with the category, the degree to which an individual is seen as a prototypical member of an identity category depends on the degree to which the attributes apply to an individual.

This argument implies that while some characteristics are commonly associated with social groups, a member of a social group does not have to display all characteristics to maintain membership. This conclusion also applies to parodies of identities; when Mock White Girl or Valley girl personas are being used as exemplars for white womanhood, one can create an indexical connection between gestures such as an open mouth, cocked head, with the California vowel shift and lexical items such as, "OMG" for a meaningful portrayal of white woman identity (Slobe, 2018; Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017). Simply using lexical items such as the phrase, "gag me with a spoon," with the phonological characteristics of the California Vowel Shift and breathy voice is enough to index identity with these groups (examples of this are in figures 2.1-2.4; a special focus being on 2.4 which is a chart of the California vowel shift).

Figure 2.1 Moon Unit Zappa's face in Valley Girl. Her mouth is open and her eyes are wide.

Figure 2.2 Moon Unit Zappa's face in her music video for Valley Girl. Notice eyes and face turned up. As well as her iconic line in the last frame, "Gag me with a spoon."

Figure 2.3 Representations of Valley girls. Right to Left: the 2020 remake of valley girl, Clueless with the line "as if," and a valley girl from Moon Unit Zappa's song Valley girl. Each of their mouths are open, indexing the Valley Girl Persona.

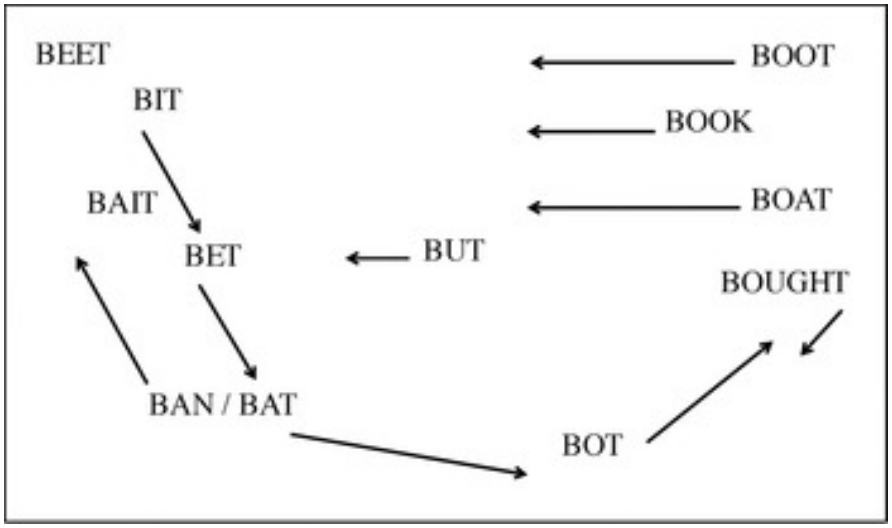

Figure 2.4 A diagram of the California Vowel Shift. Most notably the backing of the ash vowel.

Whether or not a speaker is purposefully taking a stance does not matter, as people both consciously and unconsciously take stances with every speech act and social practice (Eckert, 2008). The use of such indices can be seen in white, upper class, pre-teen girl cliques. Often fringe members who may not be white or upper class use this linguistic style in a way that illustrates belonging or at least an attempt to belong; while in contrast, non-members are mocked using mannerisms that may be commonly associated with their race, ethnicity, gender, or social status (Goodwin & Alim, 2010). However, using certain styles of language does not mean that one is a member of a social group; it means that they are using language indexically associated with the group and may be perceived as a member. The use of this style may indicate belonging to/inclusion in a sociocultural *in-group* (a clique made up of people with significantly more social capital) and may indirectly move a speaker closer to the center of the *group*, thereby reducing levels of separation from the mainstream. However, in this example of *valley girl* style, based on a stereotype from the song *Valley Girl,* it is not merely a style, but also a

stylization, which is defined as, “An artistic representation of another’s linguistic style, an artistic image of another’s language” (Goodwin & Alim, 2010).

As previously stated, the use of spoken language is not the only way to stance take (word choice?); one may also index a specific identity by body language and using multiple forms of sign systems is known as transmodal stylization. Goodwin and Alim (2010) define transmodal stylization (check quote) as,

> The ways that a stylist can produce a style that cuts across various modalities, rather than bringing these modalities into a neat, readily recognizable package. It is viewed as imperative to study meaning making in interaction with respect to an ecology of sign systems, including not only language, but gesture, the face, posture, prosody, and the material environment. It cannot be viewed outside of context (191).

One may also use indexicals of groups which one is not members of to index that certain characteristics are found in certain communities of practice. For example, gay bears will often use mock hillbilly or mock southern features to index a belongingness to the gay subculture but also because appropriating mock southern accents indexes masculinity and, in some instances, fatness as well.

While Mainstream American English or Standard American English is only a pipedream of purist prescriptivist and does not occur in nature, features commonly associated with these mythical varieties of English often index membership in mainstream American culture. As one has seen with the use of stereotypical styles indexing membership to specific American groups, there can also be styles used to index

otherness and levels of separation from American culture. For example, Margaret Cho frequently uses mock Asian and mock Korean in her routines, this can index otherness.

2.2 Fatness, Desirability and Body Image

2.2.1 Fatness, fat, and fat stigma

In Amy Erdman Farrell's book, *Fat shame: Stigma and the fat body in American culture*, fatness is described as a discrediting attribute. Farrell bases this terminology on Goffman's 1963 work, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*; fatness is a discrediting attribute because people are more than willing to go to extremes to eliminate their fat (and therefore their fatness). Fat and fatness are, "physical stigma or what Goffman calls an 'abomination of the body,'one that is clearly visible" (6). But fatness is not just a physical stigma; there are also ideologies about the morality of the fat person, "Because our culture assigns many meanings to fatness beyond the actual physical trait--that a person is glutinous, or filling a deeply disturbed psychological need, or irresponsible and unable to control primitive urges--it also has many traits of what Goffman calls a character stigma." This stigma in part contributes to the lower quality of life that many fat people are forced to live with less access to high paying jobs, quality healthcare, and romantic partnerships (9).

2.2.2 Where are the fat people?

What I believe to be one of the most interesting facets of studying fat people is that there is an absence of agency of the fat person in fat studies literature.[4] This fact,

[4] Not to repeat myself, but I am also a member of the "studied" group.

specifically relating to Obesity Discourse, is unsurprising as those who benefit from Obesity Discourse are not those who are fat. Obesity Discourse is a discourse which states the researchers on *obesity* (pathologized fatness) are to be sole sources of expertise and that the purpose of the research is to rid the public of obesity (Cooper 2016, 24). Given the stigma of fatness, one can conclude that Obesity Discourse is nearly always hegemonic discourse in that it maintains the power dynamic of the thin researcher over the fat patient. As Cooper states in Fat activism: A radical social movement (2016), "Fat activists are almost never consulted and fat people are positioned as failed subjects, typically constructed as absent, abstract, abject, anonymous, and othered, passive patient consumers in need of expert intervention" (30). It follows that non-fat people would otherize and passivize fat people in their research to maintain their power and desirability. Cooper explains that Bourdieu and bell hooks theorize that including fat (marginalized) people in research about their own bodies is not in the interests of the powerful (non-fat people, obesity researchers), because it would disrupt the hegemonic structure; bell hooks adds that the interests of the powerful are gendered, racialized and classed (31).

2.2.3 The Caricatures of Female Hotness[5]

For the purposes of this paper, we will state that body image is an extraordinarily complicated aspect of one's identity, and each person's body image is based on a myriad of sources that all intersect to create one identity. A baseline definition of "body image" is the way one views oneself (or one's identity) in relation to their body. To extrapolate

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5 This is a title from Ariel Levy's work quoted in *The Lolita Effect* (Durham, 2009).

upon this definition, identity is social and based on the interactions one has with other people, the media, and with other facets of their culture (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Keeping this definition and its implications in mind, I am led to question how the American Girl is portrayed in the media as well as the intersection of how the Asian (Korean) Girl is portrayed in the media. I must question why thinness is indexically *sexy* and fatness is indexically *unbeauteous*. I ask how body image affects one's sense of belonging to mainstream culture and American society as a whole. In relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, belongingness is a need that can only be fulfilled with social interaction; one's situatedness of belonging in society is discursive and part of one's identity.

According to *The Lolita Effect*, young girls are taught via media, clothing, and toys that to belong in American society, they need to be *hot* because, "To be hot is to be sexy" (Durham, 2009, p. 64). Sexiness, in Durham's view, is part of belonging to the mainstream. She states, "while 'hot' is a generic term that has a variety of meanings, at its core, it's about bodies and, ultimately, about sex" (68). This conceptualization means, of course, that even a young, prepubescent girl's belongingness to both her social group and society as a whole is at least partially based on how she meets the standard of attractiveness portrayed in the mainstream media.[6]

While an entire dissertation could be (and probably has been) written about the inherent sexualization of young girls, one cannot ignore the link between body image and

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[6] For example, young girl's clothing is often skintight. Young children, even preschoolers, wear pants that fit much more like leggings than actual pants. To compare with young boys clothes that are often loose fitting cargo shorts and sweatpants.

sexual desirability. Whether this covert messaging stems from Barbies with disproportionate bodies, Bratz dolls wearing skin tight clothing, magazine covers with exercise routines to get a *hot* body, Victoria's Secret ads, or even song lyrics like the PussyCat Dolls' "Don'tcha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?," the discourse is that young consumers, "quickly identify a 'hot body' as a marker of ideal femininity" (63).[7] Young people are consumers of media, and the media that they are exposed to may or may not contribute to the propagation of hegemonic discourse surrounding the idealism of body type; this desire feeds into the marketing of capitalist products that can help one achieve a *hot* look.[8] As consumers of media, the ideologies and discourse surrounding what an ideal and *hot body* means has been impressed upon young people for the vast majority of their lives--in fact, their identity can be partially shaped by how they look in comparison to others. All of this is to say that looking *hot* and having a *fit* body contributes to one's body image and that ideal *beauty standards* are part of the larger hegemonic discourse surrounding bodies, gender, race, and cultural background.

2.3 Race and Body Image

As a white woman from a mainly white community and upbringing, I understood that I needed to do a significant amount of research on Asian American culture and history as it relates to race, body image, and associated social factors. To do this research,

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[7] "Don'tcha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?," is mentioned by Durham in the book and is probably an example that I would choose to leave in the past (much like the PussyCat Dolls). I will say though that my mother loved this song and bought the album because of it.

[8] As we are all aware, no one gives a damn about how you look until they can make $$$ off of it.

I based my understanding on scholarly works, but also an anthology of memoirs titled, *YELL-O*h Girls edited by Vickie Nam (2003), and Margaret Cho's books *I'm the one that I want* (2001). I selected a variety of blog posts about personal relationships with food, body image and being Asian American as well. One might view the selection of non-academic work as an unprofessional and unscholarly choice, but I felt that if I wanted to understand at least a small part of the Asian identity, then I needed to immerse myself in the real-life experiences of Asian American people. Too often, scholarly ethnographic work separates the universal experience of humanity and the people who are the subjects of the research; too often are the subjects of the works objectified and exotified to the point where the researcher seems like an expert on an entirely new species of person; this repeating the ideologies of colonialism and a discovery of inferior difference (Erdman Farrell, 2011). What I am attempting to make clear is that academic scholarship is not the only or even the best way to learn about a culture; thus, I chose a variety of sources relating to first generation, Asian American immigrants.

Margaret Cho has had the cultural mores of both Korean culture and American culture influence her body image. She not only had to fit into the American body ideology but also the Korean body ideology (Cho, 2004). In her television series, "American Girl," which only aired for one season, Cho was forced to lose an unhealthy amount of weight in a short period of time to appeal to both an Asian and American audience's ideal body type.[9] Having to live according to both cultural standards, in terms of her race and assimilating/belonging to (white) American culture, is the basis of the

[9] AKA: Cho was told that she was too fat to play herself on television

phenomenon called *double consciousness* coined by W.E.B. DuBois in his essay *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). I will expand on this term that later, but it is worth mentioning in relation to body image and the ideal femininity that Margaret Cho grew up consuming.[10] Cho, in the Western fat liberation community, would be currently considered to be straight size and at her heaviest *small fat*; however, within South East Asian (as well as Hollywood) culture, Margaret was considered *unacceptably* fat.[11]

2.3.1 Food as a cultural icon

Cho discusses the idealization and the criminality of food/eating within her *Eating disorder* routine. However, on a broader scale, Asian people are faced with the issue of fitting into a white supremacist society when they are not white and that includes ideologies about food.

Food is a unifying factor amongst all living things, mainly because we all must consume it. However, food varies by geographic region and culture; often enough, that certain foods and traditional recipes are calling cards for home. This attitude is especially true in immigrant communities in which passing down recipes and cooking traditional foods is a way for one to connect with one's identity and family lineage. In America, dishes which have an aroma of what many may refer to as *exotic spices* or fermentations of vegetables not commonly served within predominantly white areas (like kim-chee), are often viewed

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[10] Cho has dealt with double-consciousness multiple times throughout her career and is it a theme of her standup comedy as well as her books.

[11] Small fat is a term that means on the lower end of the plus size continuum. Most people might consider a small fat person still acceptably fat in terms of proximity to thinness. Determined by clothing sizes, small fat would be between sizes 14 and 18 (this is up for debate).

as *taboo*, thus creating further degrees of separation from the ideology of being a "Red-blooded American." As a result, there may be a complicated relationship between immigrants and their food; dishes that are not considered indexically American (Nam, 2001) are often viewed as a resistance to assimilation into American society, while simultaneously remaining a vital part of one's immigrant and racial identity.

As Joseph Hernandez writes about his relationship with food, family, and culture in *The Chicago Tribune*, "Food was how I experienced the world, both old and new. Food was how I knew I was loved" (2018). For many first and second-generation immigrants, food is a connection between their family history and new lives in the world. When Joseph was confronted by his American classmates about the way his food looked and smelled, he felt shame about his native foodways, which marked him as other, a Filipino, not a real American. The food Hernandez grew up eating was not the only part of his culture and identity that he felt he had lost; he states,

> As I went through school, I lost other parts of my Filipino-ness. I lost my mother tongue. I erased my accent. My name was stripped down for parts, and I was dubbed "Joe." At home, I'd still eat my mother's meals with abandon, a dirty secret from kids at school. When I got ready in the morning, I scrubbed and scrubbed my skin in scalding hot water, in case I smelled like dried fish or, worse, pork blood. Being American meant looking, acting, talking and, yes, eating like an American. My pride in my culture and upbringing was undercut by the shame of otherness, specifically the outside world dictating that otherness — it took years to process these two realities, but ultimately, my pride won out.

Hernandez is enforcing a long-time sentiment from first generation immigrants about the assimilation into American culture through food. Joseph connects the intersection of his race and immigrant status with his language, diet, name, behavior, and smell. He states that each of these are symbolic of otherness and the desire to be both American and Filipino simultaneously. His primary account of his experiences reinforces that both American and the native country's ideologies shape a person's identity.

But one may ask, how is there a connection between food, body image, or even language? Body image is based on a variety of factors, and race inherently intersects with body image. We can clearly see this connection in the terms for different types of food that highlight both a geographic location and race/ethnicity; for example, Indian food, Chinese food, West African food, Thai food. Then there are categories of foods that have solely indexically racialized and ethnic implications such as soul food or Cajun food, or even ways of eating, such as buffets. The use of euphemized but still racially indexical language to describe varieties of food is reflective of the American ideology of not talking about race or being colorblind, instead indexing race with colloquial names or mannerisms (Goodwin & Alim, 2010). To reference Hernandez's article in the Chicago Tribune, food is the way that he experiences the world and shapes his identity (Hernandez, 2018). When Cho's mother is parodied talking about buffets, she is intertextually referencing her own identity in relation to food.

2.3.2 Meeting white standards

While food is one way to index race, playing to stereotypes also indexes race. In fact, in media representations of Asian woman, they are often highly sexualized; this repetition enregisters a sexualized identity to Asian women and they are often treated as

such (Nam, 2001). For example, in the movie *Full Metal Jacket* the phrase, "me love you long time" was used and repeated a narrative of the sexualization of Asian women (Chun, 2004). The repetition also indexes that Asian women often do sex work and work in massage parlors to give "happy endings" and it relates back to Asian women as comfort women for noblemen and political figures. These stereotypes are extremely harmful, especially in American society where Christian purity culture shames women for their sexuality. Sex workers are an extremely vulnerable group of people in general, but being a female, Asian, sex worker exacerbates this vulnerability and may further otherize and dehumanize Asian women. To mention a recent example, on March 18th, 2021, six Asian women working at spas were murder by a male, white supremacist who claimed that he could not resist his sexual urges. To put that in active voice, a white supremacist killed six Asian women who he perceived to be sex workers based on their occupation, race and gender (Lenthang, 2021).[12] Other examples of the hyper-sexualization of Asian women can be seen in Lolita girls, Harajuku girls in Gwen Stefani's music, many anime films and manga comic books (created by mostly Asian artists, but often consumed by Americans), as well as in films such as James Bond (Hiramoto & Pua, 2019). Asian women are often viewed more as objects of fetishization than human beings (Nam, 2001)

Not only does western society use Asian women to reaffirm male heterosexuality by portraying them as sexual objects, Asian women are also held to high standards of body type and beauty (Brady, et al., 2017; Hiramoto & Pua, 2019; Nam, 2001). While

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[12] The women's names and ages were: Daoyou Feng, 44; Xiaojie Tan, 49; Delaina Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; Soon Chung Park, 74; and Yong A. Yue, 63 (Lenthang, 2021). Please take a moment to hold a space for these women who were never able to return home to their families.

much research shows that Asian American women experience the same level of dissatisfaction with their bodies as other racial groups, the dissatisfaction experienced is racialized and culturally embedded (Brady, et al., 2017, p. 480). Brady, et alios state (480),

> Some researchers suggest assimilation can intensify body surveillance and awareness of racialized features that may be considered non-normative or unattractive (Cummins & Lehman, 2007). Other research suggests that the retention of traditional cultural beauty norms within more patriarchal societies can increase pressures to appear thin, modest, and attractive (Smart & Tsong, 2014).

The literature on this topic disagrees about what may affect body dissatisfaction or negative body image, but it is clear that negative body image is prevalent in Asian American women. Margaret Cho frequently mentions that she, in her career and upbringing, was commonly compared to white women but was also held to the standards of traditional Asian body type (Cho, 2001a, Cho, 2001b, Cho, 2002). This dilemma is frequently reinforced in *YELL-OH Girls* when young women wrote about their experiences of assimilation into American life and feeling bad about their bodies because they were unable to meet the beauty standards of *White America* while still meeting the standards of their ethnicity (Nam, 2001). This phenomenon of competing identities is in more modern terms referred to as intersectionality; however, it was first coined by Du Bois in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk.* Du Bois states (1903, p. 45),

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul

> by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

I am in no way comparing the oppression of Black people to the oppression of Asian women, because each person's different strands of identity indicate a different experience as human beings and, in this sense, as Americans. However, the idea of twoness, the duality, and the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" is represented in Asian American women's body image; this situation can be seen more broadly in body image in general and the creation of one's non-prediscursive identity (Brady, et al., 2017; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Nam, 2001). Body image does not have to be solely based on American beauty standards or Asian beauty standards, but can instead be both simultaneously; they are competing ideologies but not mutually exclusive.

There is much evidence that many Asian cultures view whiteness as a symbol of prestige, wealth, and high social class. Whiteness indicates that one's skin is not browned by the sun after working outdoors all day; with these ideologies one might almost see a racial hierarchy forming in many eastern and western societies. For example, in Hinduism, a sign of being high caste is having lighter skin.[13] This can be seen in modern

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[13] Okay, so I didn't think that these sorts of ideologies still existed in mainstream society until in 2020 I dated a Tamil Indian from Malaysia. He was considered high caste because of his family's wealth and educational status, but he was not high caste on the basis of race. I did ask him about the caste system and if that was still a thing. He said that the caste system wasn't really enforced and the only people who really thought anything of it were older folks. However, he insisted that he only dated white women and the more that I've thought about that I think there might be some sort of relationship there.

day obsessions with skin lightening creams. Hegemonic ideologies don't just disappear overnight (cf. racism in America), there are many remnants left behind of caste systems and if one looks at more wide spread causal phenomena, remnants of colonization by white, western civilizations and countries (Tan, 2012). Thousands of years of imperialism and colonial settler imperialism specifically shifted beauty standards and reinforced the ideology than anyone who is not white is an other and does not belong.[14] The pervasiveness of whiteness and the oppression white supremacy reinforces is not just a "me love you long time" joke told by an ignorant boy on the playground, but can be a threat to the livelihood of an entire group of people.

2.4 Humor as Social Commentary and Identity Maintenance

2.4.1 She's got jokes

One cannot forget that Margaret Cho is a standup comedian and a masterful one at that (Chun, 2004). Humor is subjective and almost entirely based on one's own experiences and personal values as well as society's deep-set mores as a whole; it's an entire ideology (Kramer, 2011). This means that perhaps some people might find extremely inappropriate jokes on taboo topics such as sexual violence to be funny; jokes of this nature and those who laugh at them may benefit from the privilege of never having to experience or fearing the experience of sexual violence (Shuster, 2013). However, people who belong to the groups they're mocking or satirizing are also common and this

[14] I'm not sure that I need a source for this because I have a degree in Classics where we study imperialism.

creates a sense of community within the audience. This does not necessarily mean that all people are going to react to in-group jokes the same way. Some folks will laugh and some folks won't; not laughing is referred to as unlaughter and is often symbolic of folks disagreeing with the joke or not finding it funny based on their own humor ideologies (Shuster, 2013; Smith, 2009).[15] An aspect of humor is subverting reality, but often enough, people will still maintain boundaries about what they believe is appropriate humor. One might say, "why does this matter?" What a group of people find humorous is generally based on the larger ideologies existing in a society (Smith, 2009). Margaret Cho, as a comedian, has a loyal audience because she typically tells jokes and anecdotes that reflect the experiences and ideologies of her listeners.

It is theorized that who one can ethically joke about is based on the inherent power structure embedded in this dreaded hegemony we live in and continuously reinforce (Schwartz, 2016).[16] This hierarchy implies that making jokes at the expense of the more powerful and privileged is probably acceptable, whereas making jokes at the expense of the less privileged and powerful is frowned upon and possibly cruel. In short, there is a difference between punching up and punching down. Punching up disrupts the power structure and is counter-hegemonic (or counter-cultural), because one is making a mockery out of people who systematically oppress them, while punching down is further

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[15] Scientists do not know why people laugh, it seems to occur after a number of different stimuli and some people laugh more than others (Smith, 2009).

[16] We meaning the reader and me, plus their cousins and every other person on the planet; I am including babies in this grouping too, little demons.

oppressing people by reinforcing hegemonic power structures.[17] In-group joking is considered generally ethical (but is a case-by-case situation), because one is an authentic member of the group and may benefit from the community that in-group joking provides (Queen, 2005). However, many people do not think that in-group joking is funny and it occurs on a person by person basis. It may also make the commentary that the subjects joked about are sources of oppression for the in-group member (Mintz, 1985; Schwartz, 2016). For example, if I, as a fat woman, were to make a joke about how I got called a whale and that I responded by burping in the harasser's face and telling them that I hope they enjoyed my whale song—that would be a perfectly appropriate joke, because it is reclaiming the insult for my own usage and commenting on how fat people are often harassed just for being fat.[18]

There is also a variety of angry humor used mostly by women, but also by other marginalized folks: fumerist humor, designed to express anger and release stress (Willet & Willet 2012). Humor is often used specifically to draw attention to inequalities faced by historically excluded and marginalized people. Margaret Cho, in a way, uses fumerist humor very subtly; one does not generally see or hear her get angry, but she uses her comedy to talk about things that may or should make any listener (or reader) angry. For example, Cho was told that she was too fat to play herself on television and she was also harassed and put down by other Korean people in the media (Cho 2001a, Cho 2001b).

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[17] Cisgender, heterosexual, upper-class, white men often complain on social media that they're so frequently the butt of a joke; not to take a controversial stance, but maybe they should be.

[18] I worked really hard to make up this crude joke on the spot, I hope you giggled. Validate me.

Cho was told by her father that she needed to watch beauty pageants to see what ideal women looked like (Cho, 2002). In a just and civil world, racism and anti-fatness would not occur.[19] Yet this form of social commentary exists, and, instead of maintaining general erasure of differences between marginalized and unmarginalized people, fumerist humor allows marginalized people to speak their minds and relay antidotes to negative opinions in a comical way, normally by punching up.

Essentially humor and satire express parts of people's identity as well as social commentary in a conversation with an audience (Brodie, 2014). Identity construction of a comedian is not only based on the audience but based on the authenticity of the speaker; however, the perception of the audience does matter because it reflects shared cultural mores between the audience and comedian (Shuster, 2013; Smith, 2009). Punching up and in-group punching are generally viewed as ethical, while punching down is viewed as cruel and unnecessary in humor (Schwartz, 2016). Women and many marginalized folks may often punch up with anger, this is fumerist humor.

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[19] If this needs a citation, then my apologies. People should be treated with respect and dignity.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

3.1 Who is Margaret Cho?

Margaret Cho is a master of comedy and was not only one of the first women in standup comedy but THE first Asian comedian in American history (Chun, 2004; Kohen, 2012). Her mentors in comedy were Robin Williams and Joan Rivers (Cho, 2015). She attended a school for the arts as a high school student but actually never graduated high school (Cho, 2001a; Cho, 2001b), instead choosing to pursue comedy. Margaret Cho is a victim/survivor of sexual violence and often works with other victims/survivors of sexual violence; she uses these experiences to create discourses about her feelings of desirability as a fat woman (Cho, 2001a; Cho, 2015; Cho, 2016). She also uses her comedy as a means of social commentary to incite political and social change (Cho, 2018). One might even say that Cho has done more work for Asian visibility than any political figure in the history of the United States.

In the context of this research, Cho is to talk about fatness, body image, Asianness, and the racial othering that many Asian women deal with (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Cho, 2001a; Cho 2001b; Cho, 2002; Chun, 2004; PBS, n.d.). Cho frequently talks about her upbringing in a white supremacist country (a country with ideologies that are based on white standards) within an Asian household and how she did not meet the beauty standards of the time or of either culture (Cho 2001a; Cho 2001b; Cho 2002; Cho 2015). In fact, she was told by Hollywood executives that she was too fat to play herself on her own television show, *All American Girl*, the first sitcom featuring Asian Americans in the United States (Cho 2001a; Cho 2001b). Throughout her life, Cho has developed multiple eating disorders, which often coincided with a history of substance

abuse, making her work a more ideal person to research (Cho 2001a; Cho 2001b; Cho 2002).

Cho's life experiences not only qualify her as the focus of this study, but her comedy itself provides a wealth of useful data. Her routines are highly expressive, and she draws on common stereotypes for each character's gestures and voice. Cho captivates her audience with skillful parodies and caricatures of her own identities (Asians, Koreans, and fat people) as well as imitations that punch up at groups of people who have historically excluded her (for example, jocks and (thin) white women). All in all, Cho is an excellent candidates for an analysis of the embodiment and intersection of race and body type/image.

3.2 Hypotheses

This thesis was written with a few research questions and hypotheses in mind. My overarching question was: How do race and body image intersect on the playing field of one's identity and feelings of otherness versus belonging? This is a subjective analysis based on both literature and my own understandings of the world as a fat woman. I wanted to understand how whiteness interferes with one's body image when people are not white. Many people consider Asian people (specifically lighter-skinned Asian people) to be white or at least more proximal to white and I hypothesized whether or not that might affect the intersectionality of one's identity. I also was quite curious to see how Cho being fat shaped her ideologies surrounding her own body as well as cultural standards associated with being fat or thin. I questioned how she might use her body, voice, and discourse to portray all of these different parts of identities.

3.3 Methodology

To conduct this research, I used multimodal discourse analysis; I examined how Cho used her body, her prosody, and her words in conjunction with each other. I asked myself, "How do her body and prosody affect the indexicality of her lexical choices and do they strengthen the relationship between a variable and the group she is parodying?" I watched and listened to every standup routine that I could find on Youtube and Apple Music to locate routines that had not been analyzed already by other scholars in the field (Chun, 2004). I chose the routines *Eating Disorder* from Cho's 2002 tour and part of *Fresh of the B(l)oat*; in both of these routines, Cho talked about being fat, Asian, and a woman and the body image issues associated with the intersections of these identities.

I transcribed any parody language in IPA in order to highlight differences between both Cho's normal language usage and, to an extent, mainstream English. I thought that it was important to compare Cho's parodies not just to mainstream English, but also to English that she used to draw attention to specific variables that might be standard for mainstream English, or for her regional dialect, but that were not typically found in her general usage.[20] This is especially important in comparison with her dialect between her valley girl or mock white girl parody (Slobe, 2018) because Cho may share some variables with this group from living in California as well as speech variables that are commonly associated with women (Cho, 2001a; Lakoff, 1972). For example, when

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[20] I don't know if there's actually any citations that I could include here, but I learned in Dr. Burkette's methods class and my variation class with Dr. Burkette that comparing a speaker against themselves allows a linguist/listener to notice variables that might be brushed off when just being compared to a regional dialect or mainstream English. Each languager is different and even though variation is systematic, there is still room for individual differences, as seen in Labov's earlier work when he discards participants that do not fall in line with his methodology/results.

researching phonemic and phonological differences found in Cho's impression of her mother (see example X), I noted the differences between her language and her parody of her mother and then found instances of Korean phonemic variables (3 ARTICLES). When transcribing Margaret's parody of fatness, I noticed that she used /ai/ monophthongization and g-dropping, speech features commonly found in my native dialect of Appalachian English (g-dropping is found in all varieties of American English, but for a reason unknown, many people indexically place it in the environment of the South or Appalachia). I took care to transcribe her fat-voice in a semi-close IPA transcription and compared it with both her general language use as well as with mainstream English.

To demonstrate issues of embodiment, I took screenshots of the Youtube videos and labeled them by the part of the routine where they occurred. In order to create a clear comparison between Cho's embodiment of stereotypes associated with certain communities and other portrayals in mainstream media, I drew on other images common in the media. For example, for mock white girl, I took screenshots of Moon Unit Zappa's music video/performance of *Valley Girl*, as well as Cher in *Clueless*, and the lead characters in the 2020 remake of the movie, *Valley Girl*; these images were chosen because they were listed in several linguistics articles about mock-white girls (Slobe, 2018; Goodwin & Alim, 2010; Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017).

When doing critical discourse analysis of the transcript, I paid special attention to instances of language use that commonly index certain identities and/or have intertextual indexical meanings to identities. For example, when Cho was discussing in her 2015 performance of *Straight off the B(l)oat* that Asian women often had an inferiority

complex to white women, I was struck with the intertextual relationship between white skin, colonialism, and the beauty market for skin lightening. When analyzing topics that Cho brought up in the textual parts of *Eating Disorder*, I was able to easily create intertextual, indexical connections because I am also a fat woman who grew up fat. To find these connections, stances, and indexicality of such, I used two texts on discourse analysis as well as notes from Rusty Barrett's discourse analysis class in Fall of 2019 (Johnstone, 2018; Fairclough, 2003).

All of these analyses were done within a fat liberation framework and perspective. Fat liberation is a social movement (and community) that seeks to liberate fat people from the discrimination that they receive in virtually all aspects of their lives (Erdman Farrell, 2009; Cooper, 2016). Using this framework is very fitting for this project because it was a research project centered on a fat woman and written by a fat woman. I did not want to pathologize the existence of fat people, especially my own existence as a fat woman.[21] Instead I chose to discuss the dehumanization of fat people and the stereotypes of fatness that allow for medical, employment, and social discrimination to occur.[22] I did not want to exclude fat women (people) from being able to embrace and accept their fat bodies and I did not want to minimize and invalidate how this is an extremely revolutionary, counter-hegemonic act. Too many fat people are subjects of studies and not enough are participants or people who are considered as experts in regard to their own bodies (Cooper, 2016).

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[21] I have worked WAY too hard on my fat acceptance/fat positivity/fat liberation work to pathologize fat bodies in my writing.

[22] There are many more types of discrimination but these are the big ones.

CHAPTER 4. DATA PRESENTATION

In this section, I present my data for the use in this thesis. The data will be available again within Chapter 5's analysis. Pictures will be under figure numbers starting with the chapter number and then the figure number; textual or speech data is represented by example number. Example the numbers will not change by chapter.

4.1 Indexing Asianness and Body Image

Within this section, I analyzed two pieces of textual data from *Fresh off the B(l)oat* and *Notorious Cho* that index the intersection between Asianness and body image. I also analyzed three different instances of gestures done by Cho that index Asianness. Each choice in data was chosen because of its indexical relationship to Asianness. Example 1 was chosen because it was in her mother's voice and she was doing a mock-Korean accent while talking about body image and food; the images (figures 4.1 and 4.2) accompanying Example 1 are gestures and body movements that are indexically associated with Asian stereotypes (and in some cases—not being white). Example 2 was chosen because Cho is directly talking about Asianness in contrast to whiteness and that was a question that I asked in my hypothesis. Figure 4.3 was included because in shows a stereotypical behavior commonly indexed with Asian people and she uses it to create community within her audience.

Below are the textual examples:

Example 1

1 I have an eating disorder. I have had one my whole life. My

2 mother had one she gave it to me she, she would say things like

3 *using mock-Korean accent* “Mommy idea of heaven is a big

4 buffet where you never get full and you never get fat”

5 *exaggerated, excited breath.*[23]

Figure 4.1 Cho imitating her mother by squinting her eyes and putting her hand on her chest

Figure 4.2 Cho opening her mouth with her eyes narrowed (Cho, 2002)

[23] The IPA transcription for Cho’s mock-Korean in line 7 is, /mã.mi.a͡id'.iʌl.ɒv. ɦɛ.və̃n.iʎ.əz.ə̃.b'ɪ:ʔ.bu.fe:.wʰe.ʌu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fʊl̪.æ̃n.ʌu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fætʰ.ɦe:h̄/

Example 2

1 But sometimes I think you know we as Asian women don't even
2 understand how beautiful we are we have a sort of inferiority
3 complex to white people. I mean I've seen that happen when you
4 see a really beautiful Asian woman and she's with the most fucked
up, busted face white man, you know… just I'm just like "bitch are
5 your eyes that small." (pause)

Figure 4.3 Margaret Cho bowing to the Asian people in the audience (Cho, 2015; image source: youtube).

4.2 Indexing Whiteness and Body Image

For this section of analysis, I analyzed three different instances of speech that indexed both body image/diet. I then analyzed four different gestures that index valley girl persona and whiteness. Example 3 and Example 4 were chosen because they have very similar content and multiple examples of similar indexicals help create an identity. Certain parts of the transcript are in IPA because it shows the usage of the California Vowel Shift as well as lengthened vowels/liquids, as well as an instance of schwa epenthesis; features commonly associated with mock-white girl and *Valley girl* personas.

There is a one line transcription of, “nothing tastes as good as being thin feels,” because it was done in a Valley girl, mock-white voice and it is a common maxim in the dieting/disordered eating community. The figures (Figure 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7) all show different facial expressions and jaw setting commonly associated with the Valley girl persona; these were done in conjunction with the speech and discourse. Highlighting that these happened each time Cho used a Valley Girl voice strengthens the indexical relationship between the voice and the gestures.

Below are the textual examples:

Example 3

1 you guys (/ʏʉ.ga͡ɪz/), I’m on a diet, seriously (/siɪ.ɹi.əs.li/). I can
2 (/kĩn/) never have carbs again (/ɛg.ɛ̃nː/). I’m on the adkins
3 (/ad.kĩnz/) diet or the zone diet or sugar busters. That (θatʰ) sugar
4 fucker diet whatever it is I’m on it. I need a salad (/sæː.l̩.ɪd/, I need
5 the dressing on the side, I need the croutons on the side (/sa͡ɪːd/), I
6 need my life on the side (/sa͡ɪːd/), okay (/œʰ.keː/)

Figure 4.4 Margaret Cho parodying a white woman. Her head is tilted to the side, her mouth is open, and her eyes are fully open.

Figure 4.5 Cho with her head tilted up, open mouth and open eyes, indexing valley girl (Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017)

Example 4

1 You guys (/ʏʉ.gə.a͡ɪz/) don't be mad. I totally ate Carla. I am so

2 sorry, she's like my best friend and I fucking ate her (/hɚː/. I feel

3 (/fiːl/) so bad. I don't know what happened (/hapʰ.ɛ̃nd/). I was just

4 super hungry (/hə̃ŋ.ɹiː/) and like I went to the gym (/d͡ʒĩːm/) and I

5 went to fisting class (/klaːs/). And she was there (/ˈθɛːɹ/) and she

6 was like, "your hair looks so (/sʉː/) cute like that (θætʰə)" and I

7 was like, "oh my god thank you!"

8 (/a͡ɪ.wəz.la͡ɪ.ʉ.ma͡ɪ.gaʷːd.θe͡ink.yu/) then *vacuum suctioning sounds

9 for 6 seconds* (/B̪:::/)

Figure 4.6 Cho parodying white women with her mouth and eyes open while she is speaking. Indexing valley girl and the epistemological stance of a lack of knowledge.

Example 5

1 Nothing tastes as good as being thin feels (in creaky voice

2 /naθ.iŋ.tes͡ts.az.gʊd.az.biːiŋ.θĩn.fiːlz/)

Figure 4.7 Cho's parody of a valley girl saying, "Nothing tastes as good as being thin feels." Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open, both indexically valley girl

4.3 Indexing Fat Femininity

This is my largest section of analysis because it is a section in which there has been the least amount of linguistic work done as well as the discovery of a new voicing,

fat voice. For this section, I use five textual examples and four images (Figures 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.11) that index not necessarily a relationship between race and body image, but instead reflect ideologies surrounding fatness and fat liberation. Examples 6 and 7 emphasize the relationship between the mainstream media and Cho's body image as well as her relationship with her parents and her eating disorder. Example 8 was chosen because it contains a variety of social information with the use of a mock-Hillbilly persona when speaking in *fat voice*; which, created many indexical relationships between ideologies surrounding Hillbillies and being fat. Figures 4.8, 4.9, and 4.10 were selected because they illustrate the indexicality between fatness, Hillbilly-ness and a lack of "manners" (to be blunt). Examples 9 and 10 were used because Cho is expressing her liberation from diet culture; in conjunction Figure 4.11 shows Cho showing off her body (she is twerking in the video), which is viewed as a liberatory act in the fat community.

The speech examples below:

Example 6

I look at the pictures of the skinny models and they're wearing clothes I can't even fit on my fingers. And I look at that and I think if that is what a woman is supposed to look like that, I must not be one, I must be some kind of fat imposter. And I just feel bad. I have a problem. I have an eating disorder. I have had one my whole life. My mother had one she gave it to me she, she would say things like *using mock-Korean accent* "Mommy idea of heaven is a big buffet where you never get full and you never get

9 fat" *exaggerated, excited breath.*[24]

Example 7

1 It just taught me that eating was a criminal act and we were
2 outlaws we {her and her brother} were like a chubby gang (yells)
3 WE'RE GONNA COME EAT THE SHIT OUT OF YOUR
TOWN!!! And my father was overly concerned about my weight
4 and I was not allowed to watch television unless it was a beauty
5 pageant. And then I had to watch it from beginning to end so that I
6 could see what women were supposed to look like. And when I
7 lost weight he was very happy with me and when I gained weight I
8 became invisible to him. And this taught me if you were thin you
9 were lovable and I wanted to be lovable so from the age of 10, I
10 became anorexic and then bulimic. I stayed that way for about 20
11 years.

Example 8

1 Then you go home and you eat the couch, you know how it is, you
2 starve yourself all day saying all kind of bullshit like "nothing
tastes as good as being thin feels." yeah then you go home you put
3 on your eating dress (/it.ĩn.dɹes/) I'm gonna put on my eating dress
4 (/ã:m.gɑ̃n.ʌ.pʊ̃t.ɑ̃n.ma:.it.dɹɛs:/) and you inhale everything in the

[24] The IPA transcription for Cho's mock-Korean in line 7 is,
/mã.mi.a͡id'.iʌl.ɒv.ɦɛ.və̃n.iʎ.əz.ə̃.b'ɪ:ʔ.bu.fe:.wʰe.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.foɻ.æ̃n.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fætʰ.ɦe:ɦ̃/

5 refrigerator whatever's in there macaroni and cheese hotdogs

6 mayonnaise pop tarts, I ate my best friend.

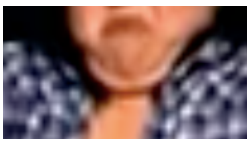

Figure 4.8 Cho's double chin

Figure 4.9 Cho says, "I'm gonna put on my eatin' dress." Her face is distorted and her body is hunched over. Like the Wutang Clan, Cho indexes a stance that she ain’t nothing to fuck with.

Figure 4.10 Cho puts on her eatin' dress. Her face is still distorted.

Example 9

I just wanted to be loved so from the age of 10, I became anorexic and then bulimic. And I almost died from it. Until one day I just said hey what if this is it? What if this is just what I look like and nothing I do changes that? *pause* So how much time would I save if I stop taking that extra second every time I look at myself in the mirror to call myself a big fat fuck? How much time would I save if I stopped taking an extra second every time I look at a photograph of myself to cringe over how fat I look? How much time would I save *pause* to just let myself walk by a plate glass window without sucking in my gut or throwing back my shoulders? How much time would I save? and I save 97 minutes a week, 'I can take a pottery class.' I pulled myself out of the game, stopped the game of, *uses mock white girl* 'you guys I'm on a

13 diet, seriously.’

Example 10

1 I have a lot of tattoos I as I'm trying to avoid plastic surgery. All
2 my friends are getting plastic surgery, I don't want to do that but I
3 want something, you know, because I was, I'm like that, like I was
4 a fat girl and a really fat kid fat teenager and I would always hang
5 out with really skinny beautiful friends and we all go shopping and
6 they buy beautiful clothes and I I would get a mug because I
7 wanted something, so this is my reason I get tattooed. I'm just
8 gonna keep getting tattoos and nobody even notices that I have
9 wrinkles they’ll just be like oh where's that turtle going.

Figure 4.11 Margaret Cho's butt with Asian Lady tattoos that look like they're talking when she twerks

CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Indexing Asianness and Body Image

5.1.1 Never Getting Full and Never Getting Fat

One of the most well-known impressions that Margaret Cho does within her standup is of her Korean mother as well as other Asian people. Cho begins her set for her *Eating Disorder* routine in *Notorious Cho* with the discussion of an eating disorder that her mother gave her she then uses an exaggerated Korean accent to parody her mother's speech (Cho, 2002).

Example 1

1 I have an eating disorder. I have had one my whole life. My
2 mother had one she gave it to me she, she would say things like
3 *using mock-Korean accent* "Mommy idea of heaven is a big
4 buffet where you never get full and you never get fat"
5 *exaggerated, excited breath.*[25]

[25] The IPA transcription for Cho's mock-Korean in line 7 is, /mã.mi.a͡id'.iʌl.ɒv. ɦɛ.və̃n.iʎ.əz.ə̃.b'ɪ:ʔ.bu.fe:.wʰe.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.foɭ.æ̃n.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fætʰ.ɦe:ɦ̃/

Figure 5.1 Cho imitating her mother by squinting her eyes and putting her hand on her chest

Figure 5.2 Cho opening her mouth with her eyes narrowed (Cho, 2002)

She uses direct reporting when quoting her mother; this technique brings two different texts, voices, and perspectives into a single dialogue between Cho and her audience (Fairclough, 2012). She marries body image, disordered eating, and race with an overly exaggerated Korean accent while portraying her mother in the line, “Mommy idea of heaven is a big buffet where you never get full and you never get fat.” The IPA transcription of this is /mɑ̃.mi.a͡ɪ̃d'.iʌl.ɒv.ɦɛ.vɜ̃n.iʎ.əz.ɜ̃.b'ɪːʔ.bu.feː.wʰe.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.foˌ.æ̃n.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fætʰ.ɦeːɦ̃/. Cho’s use of her mother’s opinion and accent highlights the indexicality between Asianness, ideal body type, and immigrant assimilation into American culture. It’s

important to note that while each indexical often points to a relationship between identity and the comedian's work, these are only variables on an indexical field illustrating general associations between a behavior or speech act and one's identity (Eckert, 2008). Cho is using language that makes ideological moves conveying the various strands of her cohesive intersectional identity; identity is intersectional and all of these themes weave together to exemplify part of Cho's identity. As Fairclough states, "The texturing of identity is thoroughly embedded in the texturing of social relations" (49). Cho is texturing and shaping her stage identity, which illustrates the intersection between being Korean, body image, and being a second-generation immigrant. She forges difference when making a noticeable distinction between her usual prosody and her mother's mock-Korean accented English.

There are several differences between the English Cho regularly uses and Cho's mock-Korean English. Syntactically, /mã.mi/ is missing the possessive /s/ which would be a determiner for the phrase *idea of heaven*. On a morphological level, when Cho says *mommy* (/mã.mi/), in English she would typically add a word final genitive case marker/possessive /z/ following a voiced phone and /s/ following an voiceless phone; in modern Korean, genitive markings are often left off of nouns.[26] However, such phenomena may be related to her frequent use of the syllable structure of consonant-vowel (CV) of Korean, which indexes non-nativeness. An example of this is her use of /nɛ.və/ (never) and /bˈɪːʔ/. She uses a glottal stop in place of /g/; this in a way contrasts

[26] There is a particle for the genitive/possessive case in Korean it is -의, which sounds like /iu/.

with English's consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) structure where she might say /nɛv.əɹ/ and /bɪg/. While the glottal stop can be found on the consonant section of the IPA chart (and is technically a consonant), /ʔ/ indicates the closing of the glottis—this creating a deletion of /g/ or a substitution of /g/ with /ʔ/. Phonetically, Cho's mock-Korean contains /ɦ/ which is a consonant not typically found in mainstream American English and lacks /ɹ/. While many American English dialects are non-rhotic, Cho regularly uses /ɹ/ in her non-mock speech. Whether or not Cho is cognizant of these overt usages of English that are not standard to her idiolect, the stance of Korean-ness is indexed through them. As discussed above, stance is used both consciously and unconsciously to create a social persona, meaning that each taking of stance (in this case using mock-Korean) creates/indexes some aspect of one's identity (Eckert, 2008).[27] She not only indexes Korean-ness, but also indexes an othering of her mother in contrast to? her own Korean-American identity, because the phonetic qualities of this accent are drastically different from her standard speech.

With indexing Korean-ness, she is also indexing her identity as a second-generation immigrant, because it is her mother who is speaking. Not only this, but Cho chooses specific indexical associations to American culture in her mother's speech. Buffets are indexically American and allow Americans to eat to excess. Buffets, in America at least, are also often associated with Asianness because the Chinese buffets are extremely popular in the United States. Cho creates an indexical relationship between her immigrant identity, Asianness, and body image when she refers to her mother as the

[27]Which one may assume that she does since she is doing an impression of her mother.

person who passed on her eating disorder and mentions never getting fat from eating too much. Part of immigrant identity is often assimilating to American culture which includes indulging in large portion sizes. Eating to extremes is almost a uniquely American stereotype as Americans are known as fat and people who eat too much.

The indexical connection between immigrant status, race, and body image is further insinuated when Cho uses stereotypical gestures to certify her mother as an authentic Asian person (see figure 5.1). In this image, Cho's eyes are not closed. She is squinting to conform to the stereotype that Asian people have extremely narrow, slanted eyelids (see also figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5). Her mouth is closed even though she is speaking, perhaps indexing an affective stance towards buffets and still having an ideal Asian body afterwards. She also has her hand on her chest as if she is speaking very passionately about her mother's desire to not gain weight but to eat as much as possible.

In figure 5.2, Cho has her eyes narrowed at an exaggerated slant, but she also has her mouth open and bottom lip rounded down. She looks "jolly," mimicking the stereotypical facial features of an Asian person, which can be seen in figures 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, are (racist) media representations of Asian stereotypes. Each media representation indexes affective stances as not just happy (indicated through smiling), like in 5.3 and 5.5, but also angry seen in 5.4. The smiling gesture on the face of the stereotypical (racist) Asian portrayals also index non-whiteness or otherness as these images are used to portray other racial groups as well. This image also is reinforced by the exaggerated, excited sigh that Cho uses when imitating her mother's reaction to her idea of heaven, reinforcing the indexicalization of expressiveness or eagerness commonly found in media representations of Asian faces and body language.

Figure 5.3 A racist, stereotype of Asian faces and gesture (Luen Yang, 2016; picture source: PBS)

Figure 5.4 Mickey Rooney, a white actor, using yellow-face to portray Mr. Yunioshi, Holly Golightly's Japanese neighbor in Breakfast at Tiffany's (Edwards, 1961; Capote, 1958; picture source: wikipedia).

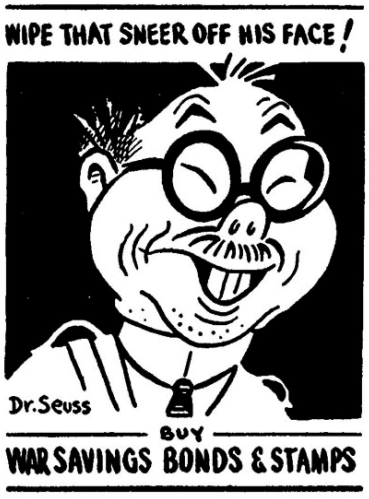

Figure 5.5 Anti-Asian Propaganda from WW2 (Seuss/Geisel, 1943; public domain).

5.1.2 Asian Bodies On a White Back Drop

Throughout her career, Cho has parodied Asian culture. Chun (2004) discusses how Cho is given license to do so as an Asian woman herself; she begins by bowing to the Asians in the audience (seen in figure 5.6), indexing Asianness by mimicking a traditional behavior in East Asian culture. She is also indexing Asianness with this gesture because she states that she is bowing to Asians in particular. There are many media representations of Asian people bowing, and it is thought to be a practice of formal respect when meeting new people in East Asian Culture. It is comparable to western practices such as rising when people of importance enter a room or removing hats in a more formal setting. Other notable examples within the media of the tradition of bowing can be seen in America's Next Top Model season 3, episode 11, in which the models perform the rituals in a Japanese tea ceremony or more notably, Mulan bowing to the matchmaker in Disney's *Mulan* (see Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.6 Margaret Cho bowing to the Asian people in the audience (Cho, 2015; image source: youtube).

Figure 5.7 Mulan bowing out of respect to the matchmaker after setting them on fire (Disney, 1998; image source: youtube).

Later in her routine, Margaret talks about how so often Asian women do not consider themselves to be beautiful, especially against a white back drop. She states,

Example 2

1 But sometimes I think you know we as Asian women don't even
2 understand how beautiful we are we have a sort of inferiority
3 complex to white people. I mean I've seen that happen when you
4 see a really beautiful Asian woman and she's with the most fucked
5 up, busted face white man, you know… just I'm just like "bitch are
6 your eyes that small." (pause)

Immediately, in line one Cho states, *we* to assert her membership and to identify herself as an Asian woman. Using *we* also implies a group membership with Asian women who have compared their beauty and their bodies to white women. She then continues in line 2 to state that Asian women often have an inferiority complex to white people creating an indexical relationship between whiteness and the ideal. Body dissatisfaction in Asian women is often thought to result from comparison with white women. However according to Brady et al, "This is highly problematic because it obscures the complexity of women's experiences by positioning White women as the "norm," which in turn underemphasizes racially salient features and distinct experiences for marginalized groups" (2017, p. 479). Cho is noting that, as a member of this marginalized group, her bodily dissatisfaction was often connected to comparison with white people. In line 2 Cho states, "I mean I've seen that happen when you see a really beautiful Asian woman and she's with the most fucked up, busted face white man." In this instance, Cho is strengthening the indexical relationship between whiteness and the ideal by stating that a beautiful Asian woman often ends up with an ugly white man, implying that an ugly white man is a better choice in a partner than an attractive Asian. This practice reinforces

a hegemonic ideology of a proximity to whiteness and the social inclusion that comes, in a white supremacist state, when Black, indigenous, people of color align themselves with white people.

Cho continues in line 6 by saying, “you know… just I'm just like ‘Bitch, are your eyes that small.’” This statement indexes Asianness by referring to the smallness of the woman’s eyes (as discussed above, a trait commonly associated with Asian people and reminiscent of Cho’s impressions of her mother). Using the term *bitch* as a vocative towards another Asian woman is indexing solidarity, rather than insult. She is also indexing a stance of confusion as she expresses her disbelief that a beautiful Asian woman would ever date such an ugly white man.

Colonialism has contributed to the privileging of whiteness in Asian cultures, because whiteness indicates that one does not have to work outdoors. Thus, one’s skin is not darkened by the sun. Hegemony and capitalism are in a near symbiotic relationship in this case. Capitalism reinforces hegemonic ideologies about work, wealth and class. As a result, it is no surprise that products to make one’s skin lighter are extremely popular in Asia and make up 13 billion dollars of the 80-billion-dollar Asian beauty industry (Kearns, 2018). Figures 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10 are all examples of advertisements for skin lightening products that index ideal whiteness. As a scholar, I cannot overemphasize the pervasiveness of white supremacy and colonialism in the creation of this indexical relationship between whiteness and idealness.

The pervasiveness of white supremacy and colonialism can be seen in figures 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10. These are advertisements for skin lightening products sold in Asia; skin lighteners and bleaches are also sold in America, but are marketed as, “dark spot

correcting," or "pigment correcting" creams and serums (again, relating back to America's distaste in talking about race. In figure 5.8, the product's advertisement is stating, "whatever keeps my skin the purest white." The key word in the advertisement is the word pure, indexing a relationship between idealness and whiteness. This product is clearly marketed to Asian women because an Asian woman is seen on the advertisement indexing an affective stance by smiling as they want to keep their skin the purest white.

In figure 5.9, an Asian woman is unzipping her face to reveal a paler face. The advertisement claims that the product is sold to get rid of freckles or what American products might claim to be pigment correcting, but when she unzips her face it is a few shades lighter, even though she only wanted to remove her freckles; this again indexing a relationship between whiteness and ideal skin color in Asian cultures. In figure 5.10, a woman is gradually getting happier the lighter her skin is by using a skin lightener. A special fact about this product is that it's made by an American company, Proctor and Gamble; meaning that America is involved in perpetuating ideas related to white supremacy. This product is caller Fair and Lovely, even the title is indexing a relationship between fair skin and beauty.

Figure 5.8 An advertisement for skin lightning cream (credit: nickgraywfu/Flickr/CC; Asian Scientist Magazine)

Figure 5.9 A freckle lightening cream that unzips a new, paler face (photo: www.qoo10.sg).

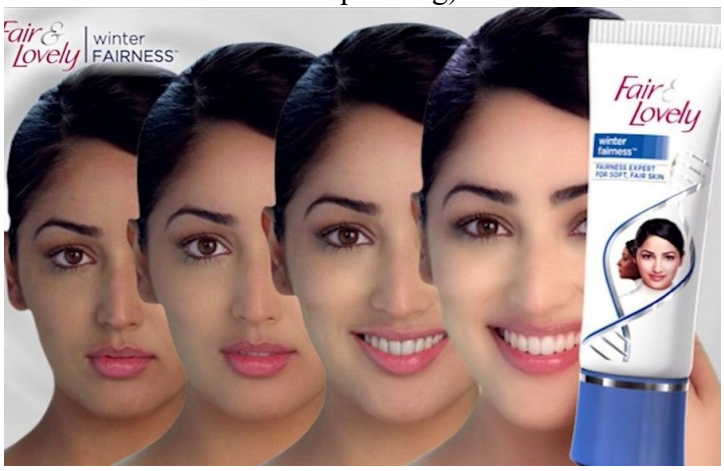

Figure 5.10 Fair and Lovely, a product from Proctor and Gamble that shows a woman's face getting happier the lighter her skin tone (source: vox).

5.2 Indexing Whiteness, Thinness, and Femininity

5.2.1 And she was acting like… and I was sounding like, like 'OH MY GOD'

Cho's parodies are not limited to Asians, however. She also parodies white women talking about dieting in *Eating Disorder*, a routine from *Notorious CHO* (2002). When Cho impersonates white women when talking about dieting and disordered eating, she is establishing an indexical relationship between whiteness and dieting as well as whiteness and thinness as ideals. As discussed above, Cho is a uses satire and comedy to punch up to balance power dynamics (Schwartz, 2016). Nevertheless, asserting that whiteness and thinness are ideal is not actually committing to the assertion that these phenotypes are truly ideal. Rather, in her comedy, they serve as social commentary about Western ideologies surrounding body type and race (Mintz, 1985). She is, in this sense, establishing the criteria for the punch up—white, thin women who promote disordered eating to achieve the ideal body.

As a fat Asian woman, Cho's parody of white women subverts reality and allows her to point out the systemic power imbalance between herself and white women. This persona is also conveyed by lexical items such as the use of emphatic "so" and "like," phonological features such as the California vowel shift in which vowels move up in the vowel space before nasals and move down in the vowel space before other consonants, creaky voice or vocal fry (Slobe, 2018; Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017; Podesva & Callier, 2015). Cho often uses these features in her routine creating a solid indexical relationship with not just whiteness and thinness, but also whiteness and disordered eating as well as whiteness, a commentary on the intelligence of the women who choose this path, and continued dissatisfaction with one's weight. Cho essentially poses the question "If a thin,

white woman is dissatisfied with her body, then how is a fat Asian woman supposed to feel?"

5.2.2 I need my life on the side, okay?

In this routine, Cho first parodies white women when she says, "food issues" at 01:11:09. She indexes the valley girl persona and the California vowel shift in this phrase (IPA transcription: /fʉd.ɪʃ.ʉz/). Food issues imply disordered eating or issues with food; in this scenario, she was talking about herself and how her eating was viewed in the context of a white, cosmopolitan backdrop. Later Cho uses gestures, phonological features and lexical items to further embody white womanhood. While not every sound and gesture Cho uses indexes a valley girl persona, enough information is included to do so (Barrett, 2017; Slobe, 2018; Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017). Below are two examples of valley girl parodies in Cho's performance followed by their IPA transcriptions as well as some of her mock white girl gestures in figures 5.11, 5.12, 5.13 and again, later in 5.14.

Example 3

7 you guys (/ʏʉ.gaɪ̯z/), I'm on a diet, seriously (/siɹ.ɹi.əs.li/). I can
8 (/kĩn/) never have carbs again (/ɛg.ɛ̃nː/). I'm on the adkins
9 (/ad.kĩnz/) diet or the zone diet or sugar busters. That (θatʰ) sugar
10 fucker diet whatever it is I'm on it. I need a salad (/sæː.l̩.ɪd/, I need
11 the dressing on the side, I need the croutons on the side (/saɪ̯ːd/), I
12 need my life on the side (/saɪ̯ːd/), okay (/œʰ.keː/)

Figure 5.11 Margaret Cho parodying a white woman. Her head is tilted to the side, her mouth is open, and her eyes are fully open.

Figure 5.12 Cho with her head tilted up, open mouth and open eyes, indexing valley girl (Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017)

Example 4

10 You guys (/ʏʉ.gə.a͡ɪz/) don't be mad. I totally ate Carla. I am so

11 sorry, she's like my best friend and I fucking ate her (/hɚː/. I feel

12 (/fiːl/) so bad. I don't know what happened (/hapʰ.ɛ̃nd/). I was just

13 super hungry (/hə̃ŋˌɹiː/) and like I went to the gym (/d͡ʒĩːm/) and I

14 went to fisting class (/klaːs/). And she was there (/ˈθɛːɹ/) and she

15 was like, "your hair looks so (/sʉː/) cute like that (θætʰə)" and I

16 was like, “oh my god thank you!”

17 (/a͡ɪ.wəz.la͡ɪ.ʉ.ma͡ɪ.gaʷːd.θe͡ink.yu/) then *vacuum suctioning sounds

18 for 6 seconds* (/B̤:::/)

Figure 5.13 Cho parodying white women with her mouth and eyes open while she is speaking. Indexing valley girl and the epistemological stance of a lack of knowledge.

Notice in both speech examples that she begins her parody off with “you guys,” immediately providing social information to listeners, namely “I am doing vocal impressions of a valley girl, a shallow white woman.” Her vowels align with the California Vowel shift, and she uses referential “like” as well as emphatic “so.” These features have been identified as markers of a valley girl persona, but also as markers of women’s speech more broadly (Goodwin & Alim, 2010; Lakoff, 1972; Pratt & D’Onofrio, 2017). Her gestures and speech in figures 5.11, 5.12, 5.13 index white, thin, cosmopolitan femininity.

When Cho parodies white woman’s speech, she is automatically recognized as an illegitimate speaker, because she is neither white nor thin (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This act brackets differences and creates a solidarity between herself and her not thin or not white audience while creating a caricature of white women. In these examples, Cho is

indexing a relationship between white, thin, ideal, and disordered eating. However, because Valley Girl is also indexically urban, Cho is indexing thinness with living in a cosmopolitan area, more specifically California (Slobe, 2018). This further implies that Cho's parody is a subversion of reality to not only make a mockery of white women, but to insinuate that white, thin, urban women are considered the exemplar of an ideal woman in American Society: a model citizen against whom all other woman are measured. The Valley Girl parody when performed by a non-white, and/or fat speaker is counter-hegemonic and further illustrates the power imbalances between these groups.

However, there are some similarities between the way that Cho has presented her life in regard to her eating disorder (her mother's legacy) and the acceptance of disordered eating in the Valley Girl community. Both index that never getting fat is the goal when eating. For Valley girls this means the exclusion of the macronutrient carbohydrates (orthorexia nervosa), known for providing invaluable energy or excessively eating and then "gag me with a spoon" (bulimia nervosa). For Cho's Korean mother, her dream is being able to eat to excess and never get full or fat (binge eating). Both of these communities of practice promote disordered eating and untenable body goals. This view is reinforced when Cho is parodying a valley girl and says (serving as example 5), "Nothing tastes as good as being thin feels," while using creaky voice (see figure 5.14 for gestures). The IPA transcription for this is, /naθ.iŋ.tes͡ts.æz.gʊd.æz.biːiŋ.θɪ̃n.fiːlz/. With the use of creaky voice, vowel lengthening, Valley Girl gestures, as well as an underlying discourse supporting eating disorders, Cho is indexing valley girl (Pratt & D'Onofrio, 2017). By using white, urban and thin as a parody but also an exemplar, her social commentary then becomes that the thin, urban,

white woman's quest for bodily perfection is ridiculous. Contrasting the indexical relationship with disordered eating to the quest for bodily perfection with the ideal of a thin, urban, white woman, Cho is also indexing a relationship between whiteness and being harmful. She is interweaving the notions of attaining an indexically ideal body with her mother's idea of heaven as well as the promotion of eating disorders associated with both groups. However, Cho is aware that she will never be able to be a member of the ideal white woman club. As a result, she is making the point that no matter how much she harms herself to achieve this goal, she and Black, indigenous people of color will always be an other.

Figure 5.14 Cho's parody of a valley girl saying, "Nothing tastes as good as being thin feels." Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open, both indexically valley girl.

5.3 Indexing Fat Femininity

Cho not only talks about her relationships with her mother in her sketch, she also talks about her relationship with her father in regard to her relationship with her body. A finding in this chapter worth noting is that Cho replicates the common media

representation of fat women in her routine by using a mock fat impression or what I title, *fat voice*, which is indexical of Southernness or Hillbilly culture and the negative language ideologies indexed by those environments. This usage may lend to the negative stigmas associated with being fat as well as the mistreatment of fat people.

Finally, this chapter is finished with a section on fat liberation and how Cho embodies liberatory ideologies in her standup routines. A short section is dedicated to the differences in fat acceptance and body positivity.

5.3.1 We're gonna eat the shit outta your town: Burly, Scary, Southern, Unlovable and Fat

In Cho's 2002 special, *Notorious CHO*, Margaret has a specific section related to body image titled, Eating Disorder. She begins the routine by discussing the ideal woman and how she would never be one, she states,

Example 6

I look at the pictures of the skinny models and they're wearing clothes I can't even fit on my fingers. And I look at that and I think if that is what a woman is supposed to look like that, I must not be one, I must be some kind of fat imposter. And I just feel bad. I have a problem. I have an eating disorder. I have had one my whole life. My mother had one she gave it to me she, she would say things like *using mock-Korean accent* "Mommy idea of heaven is a big buffet where you never get full and you never get

9 fat" *exaggerated, excited breath.*[28]

In the first line, Cho creates a value assumption, an assumption based on what is good or desirable to society; she does so by idealizing the woman's body image attached to the hegemonic standards of the time (Fairclough, 2012, 55). The models that she is referring to were women such as Kate Moss, who is typical of the trend of *Heroin Chic*, and is woman who was much smaller than the average size 14 woman in America in 2002.[29] "What a woman is supposed to look like" is a stinging phrase in one's ears, with the implicature that any woman who is not shaped like Kate Moss does not embody womanhood (see Figure 5.15). Cho, herself, states that she is a fat imposter of a woman—thus reinforcing the assertion that to be indexically feminine involves being thin and the gate to womanhood is kept by those who are perceived as "sexy" or desirable (Durham, 2009). In this sense, Cho is making the existential assumption that womanhood conforms the hegemonic idea of what exists within a framework of what mainstream femininity has determined.

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[28] The IPA transcription for Cho's mock-Korean in line 7 is,
/mã.mi.a͡id'.iʌl.ɒv.ɦɛ.və̃n.iʎ.əz.ə̃.b'ɪːʔ.bu.feː.wʰe.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fʊl̩.æ̃n.ʎu.nɛ.və.gɛ.fætʰ.ɦeːɦ̄/

[29] *Heroin Chic*, according to a zoom chat meeting on February 22nd, 2021 with Rusty Barrett, was the trend of women looking like they used heroin. This look involved being extremely thin and having sallow, sunken eyes with large circles under them (essentially looking malnourished).

Figure 5.15 A picture of Kate Moss taken early in her career (source: the English shop)

When Cho jokes that she must be "some kind of fat imposter," she creates a distance between not only herself and womanhood, but a distance between all fat women and womanhood. This statement elucidates a bracketing of differences between fat and thin women, forming both a boundary to being indexically feminine as well as in-group solidarity between fat women in opposition to thin women. Her bracketing of differences also serves as a value assumption in which she makes a discernable difference between what is desirable and what is not. She groups herself into what is not desirable. Cho, in this sense, takes a stance indexing belonging to this social group of "less than desirables" or "the common people." However, her stance includes an indexicalization of a stigma of being viewed as less than or not quite a woman (Erdman Farrell, 2011, 6; Goffman, 1963). This stigma is perpetuated when she goes on to discuss her eating disorder. She takes an affective stance about her body in relation to her value assumption of bodily

worth and belonging to mainstream, hegemonic culture. She then marries her body image with her racial identity and relation to the American phenomenon of buffets.

Cho's affective stance of feeling inferior because she doesn't belong to the hegemonic idea of womanhood serves to create an indexical relation between *feelings of exclusion* and being fat. She continues in lines three through six by problematizing her body and dietary habits as an eating disorder; this frame creates a further bracketing of difference between the ideal, thin body and the fat, sad body.

Later in the routine, Cho discusses the relationship between eating, the relationship with her family and her own feelings of lovability.

Example 7

It just taught me that eating was a criminal act and we were outlaws we {her and her brother} were like a chubby gang (yells) WE'RE GONNA COME EAT THE SHIT OUT OF YOUR TOWN!!! And my father was overly concerned about my weight and I was not allowed to watch television unless it was a beauty pageant. And then I had to watch it from beginning to end so that I could see what women were supposed to look like. And when I lost weight he was very happy with me and when I gained weight I became invisible to him. And this taught me if you were thin you were lovable and I wanted to be lovable so from the age of 10, I became anorexic and then bulimic. I stayed that way for about 20 years.

In example 7, Cho states that she was taught by her father that eating was a criminal act and she shows a solidarity with her brother that they were both partaking in the crime of eating, more specifically of binge eating. This statement aligns with her earlier usage of thin versus fat to build solidarity with not just the fat women in the audience, but also with the fat men. Her reference to eating being criminal reinforces the idea of an eating disorder as a shameful criminal act. In example _ line 5; an eating disorder is indexed by referring to the secrecy involved in eating, essentially akin to the secrecy surrounding criminal activity. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, a precursor and component of binge eating disorder is, "Has secret recurring episodes of binge eating (eating in a discrete period of time an amount of food that is much larger than most individuals would eat under similar circumstances); feels lack of control over ability to stop eating" (NEDA, 2018, pp. 2; DSM-5, 2013, 345-353). In lines 10-11, Cho confirms that she did in fact have a life-threatening eating disorder.

When Cho states that she was only allowed to watch beauty pageants, so that she could see what real women were supposed to look like, that cements the indexical relationship between thinness and being a woman and that fatness is an exclusion from womanhood. It's also important to note that the women Cho would have been seeing in beauty pageants in the 70's and early 80's were mostly white women; this reinforces the hegemonic ideologies that white equals thin, white equals femininity and that white equals ideal. In fact, by the year 2020, only one Asian woman has won Miss America, Angela Perez Baraquio in 2001 (E!Online, 2019). Margaret Cho has been quoted by PBS saying, "I was not allowed to even entertain the fantasy of becoming one of these women.

And I thought well maybe I'm just not pretty enough. Maybe I'm just not white," (PBS, n.d.). There have been no “plus-size” or fat winners of Miss America in its 99-year history.[30]

Cho then states that when she was thin, she was lovable, but when she was fat, she was invisible to her father. This sentiment again brackets differences indexing thin as lovable and ideal and fat as unlovable and “invisible.” Invisible is an interesting indexical choice in this situation as many fat women report that they feel invisible in many social settings, because people ignore them or do not make eye contact with them. In fact, when Gwyneth Paltrow wore a fat suit in *Shallow Hal* to play the character of Rosemary, Paltrow recalled that she was forced to go to a bar in public to test out whether or not she would be recognized in her fat suit (figure 5.16). Instead of being acknowledged at all by the public, people avoided eye contact with her, making her feel socially isolated and undesirable. She states, “It was so sad. It was so disturbing. No one would make eye contact with me because I was obese. I felt humiliated” (Boyd, 2020). Paltrow’s experience in a fat suit is a representation of the invisibility that many fat women, including Cho feel (or felt).[31] Invisibility is not a bracketing of differences, but instead the suppression and erasure of a marginalized group of people. This experience is not limited to these two celebrities, but is instead a reflection of hegemonic norms in daily life for fat people.

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[30] Miss America 2021 has been postponed for…obvious reasons.

[31] I can in fact say, “feel” here. I am a fat woman with many fat friends and the feelings of invisibility are daunting.

Figure 5.16 Paltrow in a fat suit playing the character of Rosemary in Shallow Hal (Buzzfeed).[32]

Cho concludes with the statement, "And this taught me if you were thin you were lovable, and I wanted to be lovable. So, from the age of 10, I became anorexic and then bulimic. I stayed that way for about 20-years." Lovability and visibility are not mutually exclusive concepts in Cho's routine. At this point she is indexing fatness as both invisible and unlovable and thinness as visible and lovable. Cho is further bracketing herself into an a socially undesirable and unlovable group, the fat people. This piece indicates that it is not only she who has this value assumption of what fat people are supposed to be, so does her father. Her father is reinforcing the hegemonic discourses surrounding body weight and shape. She is also aligning herself with the group of people who had/have disordered eating, creating a sense of community in her audience with her as an exemplar, further authenticating her position as a member of the oppressed crowd. Not only is Cho aligning herself with people with eating disorders, she is also providing a logical chain of events between the fat woman's experience of being told that she is

[32] This movie is extremely offensive and Hal only loved Rosemary when he couldn't see that she was fat.

unlovable and invisible, indexing fatness, to an unhealthy extreme of an eating disorder to become lovable and desirable, indexing thinness. Eating disorders are often the result of having an unhealthy relationship with food and having prominent adults reinforce ideologies thinness as lovable and visible. Cho is performing standup comedy but nothing about eating disorders is remotely humorous; in this portion of the routine she inserts some much-needed social commentary about the effects of growing up in a home and society where one's body is not celebrated as *ideal*, indexically feminine, desirable, lovable, or visible.

The erasure of a marginalized group of people is hegemonic, as it flows from the norm. Because of the treatment of being invisible or suppressed, when fat people are represented in media often portrayed as caricatures of themselves. One might consider depictions of fat women such as Courtney Cox's role as fat Monica in *Friends*, a number of roles that Melissa McCarthy has played throughout the years (such as in *Tammy, Identity Theft, The Heat, Mike and Molly*, etc.), Rosanne Barr in the earlier seasons of *Rosanne*, or Chrissy Metz role of Ima Wiggles in *American Horror Story*. In fact, in many sitcoms, fat people are often never seen, just mentioned. In these different texts, fatness is <u>not</u> indexed as a positive, intellectual, feminine or desirable persona in the media (Greenberg, et al, 2003).

Cho produces the social difference of creation and assertion, or creating a caricature within her standup special by reproducing the stereotype of fatness not only with her words, but also her prosody, phonemic choices, and her gestures in example 8 an figures 5.17, 5.18, and 5.19.

Example 8

1 Then you go home and you eat the couch, you know how it is, you
2 starve yourself all day saying all kind of bullshit like “nothing”
3 tastes as good as being thin feels.” yeah then you go home you put
4 on your eating dress (/it.ĩn.dɹes/) I’m gonna put on my eating dress
5 (/ã:m.gɑ̃n.ʌ.pʊt̃.ɑ̃n.ma:.it.dɹɛs:/) and you inhale everything in the
6 refrigerator whatever's in there macaroni and cheese hotdogs
7 mayonnaise pop tarts, I ate my best friend.

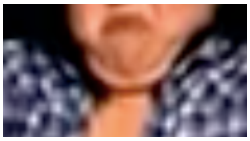

Figure 5.17 Cho's double chin

Figure 5.18 Cho says, "I'm gonna put on my eatin' dress." Her face is distorted and her body is hunched over. Like the Wutang Clan, Cho indexes a stance that she ain’t nothing to fuck with.

Figure 5.19 Cho puts on her eatin' dress. Her face is still distorted.

As any scholar might ask, “What the Sam Hill is an eatin’ dress?” An eatin’ dress is an intertextual indexical reference to rural, southern culture in which people have different outfits for different types of occasions and is also indexically related to working class people. Consider, one’s “Sunday best.” Working class folks, specifically the working poor, often have “work clothes” and “home clothes.” Each of these sets of clothes are for separate occasions and are often only worn for these occasions because clothing is expensive and not easily replaced. This also relates to blue collar, working class life in that many working-class jobs have uniforms—creating a utilitarian relationship to clothing rather than clothing as a means of accessory or personal style. An eatin’ dress is a dress that a woman would wear to eat in; one might also think, “fat pants.” With intertextual indexical relationship between Southern people, white, working class people, and clothing specifically designed for indulging in food/being fat one might compare that to the portrayal of a thin, white, feminine woman is urban and Californian.

Cho also indexes toughness when she is putting her eating dress on and saying, /*ãːm.gãn.ʌ.pʊ̀t̚.ãn.maː.it.ĩn.dɹɛsː/.* She deepens her voice and uses breathy voice; she sounds like her body has been possessed by the spirit of a hungry bear; this can be seen in figure 5.18 in which her face is indexically angry and contorted. This indexes a lack of sophistication commonly associated with rural, working class, and southern, as well as a lack of femininity. Her body is hunched over, looking like a monster or someone with bad posture (typically associated with the working class). While she is putting on her eating dress, she exaggerates her double chin to index fatness (see figure 5.17).

How else is an eatin' dress indexical of southerness, working classness, and ruralness? Cho contextualizes *eating dress (/it.ĩn.dɹes/)* and *I'm gonna put on my eating dress (/ãːm.gãn.ʌ.pʊ̀t̚.ãn.maː.it.ĩn.dɹɛsː/)* by use of monophthongization and g-dropping. Monophthongization is heard in /ãːm/ and /maː/ (*I'm* and *my* respectively) instead of mainstream English's /a͡ĩm/ and /ma͡i/. G-dropping is found in the word eatin' /it.ĩn/ instead of *mainstream English's* eating /it.ĩŋ/. Again, g-dropping is found in all variations of American English, but it is often attributed to the South and Appalachia. These features are localized to the regions of the southeastern United States (Southern English) and Appalachia (Appalachian English). Being from the south or from Appalachia does not make one working class; however, there are more working-class people who make up the population in places like Appalachia, since most jobs require physical labor.[33] When looking at the inhabitants of the South, one often draws the indexical field of Black

[33] Aka the evil that is coal mining. Source: I am from Appalachia. Please do not make me go off about Appalachia being an internal colony of the United States, I do not have that energy today.

people and poor whites, and in Appalachia, *hillbillies*; when one draws the indexical field of people who are most likely to *natively* use monophthongization and g-dropping in their speech, the indexical field includes Black people, poor whites, and Hillbillies. [34] Black English/African American English/African American language is known to use these features because after the great migration, words such as "yinz," a shortened version of "you-ins" which is Appalachian for an exclusive "y'all" or more formally "you all" (Johnstone, 2013).

The portrayal of fat characters using mock-southern English may be indexically linked to Black people because they are speakers of the same or a similar dialect. There is an indexical relationship between Blackness and fatness as well as anti-Black racism and fatphobia. For example, Sarah Baartman was an African woman who was used as a form of sideshow entertainment because she had a curvature of her spine and wide hips making her buttocks appear extremely large. We can also trace anti-Black racism to mammie characters in the media, which were remnants of the Jim Crow era. A mammie is/was a Black woman who takes care of white children and was often portrayed as fat, imagine the original Aunt Jemima Syrup bottles or Hattie McDaniel.

One might, at this point, be concerned that Margaret Cho is committing Black face by using a mock southern accent, the answer is no. A variable may be used by multiple communities of practice because variables are not fixed to one specific locality or group. For example, I am a fat, Appalachian woman who frequently indulges in monophthongization and g-dropping and I am not appropriating Black culture when

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[34] I AM a Hillbilly and I will use this word if I please.

speaking in my native dialect. As Eckert states, “Variables have indexical fields rather than fixed meanings because speakers use variables not simply to reflect or reassert their particular pre-ordained place on the social map but to make ideological moves” (2008, 464). In fact, it is more likely that Margaret Cho is playing off of the Hillbilly bear stereotype from the Disney production (renamed country bears, again indexing rurality) playing on the stereotypes of southerners and mountain folks (Appalachians) (see figures 5.20, 5.21, and 5.22 for examples of Hillbilly and now Country bears). This would be more likely indexically because Cho is also acting like a scary bear when she is putting on her eatin’ dress (refer to figures 5.18 and 5.19).

The Hillbilly bears in figures 5.20 and 5.21 who become the Country Bears in 5.22 are examples of the portrayal of southern folk. If one were to watch the Hillbilly Bears they would notice an indexically Appalachian/Southern dialect and a lack of sophistication in the lifestyle of the bears. In 5.20 the family is playing in a Bluegrass/Southern band, indicated by Pa using a makeshift upright bass, Ma playing on the tambourine, the baby blowing into a moonshine bottle and the daughter playing an electric steel guitar, commonly found in country music. Not only that, Ma bear in 5.21 is wearing her very own eatin’ dress and is mighty fat. These *harmless* cartoons further the stigmatization of the Southern or Mountain folk as indexically unsophisticated. Figure 5.22 is from the Country Bears at a Disney theme park, this is the less offensive evolution of the Hillbilly Bears, but still portrays a backwardness based on the clothing worn by the bears (a bit pre-antebellum).

Figure 5.20 The Hillbilly Bear family. Notice: the baby bear is blowing into a moonshine bottle (indexically Appalachian), the father bear is playing a makeshift upright bass (traditionally found in Bluegrass music).

Figure 5.21 The mother bear in her "eatin' dress."

Figure 5.22 The country bear jamboree at Disneyworld (source: mental floss).

Other groups have also appropriated southern, Appalachian, and white working-class dialects to index their body type, including fat, hairy gay men, also known as Bears (Barrett, 2017). Gay Bears are men who do not fit the typical body size for gay men, but which celebrates the body size of its members. As Barrett explains, "The linking of body type with working class signs allows bears to reposition larger bodies within a context in which weight can be interpreted as an index of masculinity and sexual desirability" (114). This subculture originated in the 1970's and 1980's San Francisco, Cho's hometown, the city where her parents owned a gay bookstore; her exposure to bear culture during her formative years may have perhaps been influential as a result.[35]

However, fat women are generally not gay bears, so that draws the question as to what it implies when fat women are voiced with mock-southern and mock-hillbilly

[35] Cho was born on December 5th, 1967. Gay Bear culture was becoming increasingly popular during her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

features.[36] Margaret Cho is not alone in voicing a fat woman with a gruff, breathy voice and the use of monophthongs—this portrayal is a consistent image of fat women in the media. For example, Chrissy Metz character in *American Horror Story* began the season with the name Barbara and used mainstream English; after joining a freak show, she was branded as Ima Wiggles and began to use indexically southern speech features. Metz's character even begins to wear an "eatin dress" (figure 5.23). Monica's voice in *Friends* deepens when she puts on her fat suit and becomes fat Monica, even though according to tube theory, the F2 of her schwa would not have changed just by having more body fat; her voice should not have changed, yet it does (5.24). Rosanne Barr, in the early episodes of *Rosanne,* frequently uses indexically white working-class and southern features; there is actually an episode of Rosanne with the word hillbilly in the title. While linguistics lacks a name for this voicing, I propose the term Fat-Voice to describe the voice used by the media to index common ideologies associated with fat characters, specifically women.

[36]As a fat, female hillbilly, I would like to make it clear that my culture should not be the media's costume for fat women.

Figure 5.23 Chrissy Metz as Ima Wiggles. Notably, she is wearing an indexically Southern bow while eating in one picture and is performing on stage with a guitar in the other (looking like June Carter Cash from Walk the Line). Both images indexing Southern.

Figure 5.24 Fat Monica from Friends, eating a bagel--indexing indulgence.

Fat women are indexed as creatures (illustrated by Cho's bear impression) who lack sophistication, have lower social status, and are generally poor. Fatness is often viewed as an issue of over-indulgence and a pathology rather than as a body type. This attitude is reflected in Cho's impression of her mother in Example 1 in which she uses direct reporting to state that her idea of heaven is a big buffet where one never gets full or fat, creating a causation between overeating and fatness. Even though body type and

fatness are mostly determined by genetics, hegemonic systems seek to control fat people through pathologizing it as "obesity" and making it seem like a preventable body type entirely determined by personal choice. It is much easier to write off fatness as a diseased character flaw when it is indexically signified by dialects that often indicate a lack of class and formal education. It is much easier to medically discriminate against fat people when their fatness is seen as a choice. It is much easier to erase and stereotype fat characters when they're viewed as unlovable and undesirable, barely even people.

Fat-voice generally indexes an absence of femininity; bears use indexically Southern and working-class features by choice to index masculinity. The use of fat-voice is a stereotypical representation of fat women, a representation that they did not choose but instead has been thrust on them by a hegemonic society. Fat women have to be hyper-feminine or hyper-correct in their femininity in order to be seen as at least partial members of the woman club. This expectation? Portrayal? further creates a bracketing of differences between fat women and thin women; fat voice and fat representation in the media is often diametrically opposite of the representation that thin women receive. A lack of femininity for a heterosexual woman is often less desirable, as Cho herself indicates in Example X, line two, "And I look at that and I think if that is what a woman is supposed to look like that, I must not be one, I must be some kind of fat imposter." Fat women face an absence of desirability and inclusion to groups that they should already be a member of because of their gender identity; fat-voice may contribute to this attitude.

5.3.2 Liberation: Being fat is not a criminal act

Margaret Cho is a dynamic, masterful comedian, because she includes her own redemption arc in her performances and routines. She states that she was ashamed of her

body and that she felt invisible, but she also realized that she did not have to live in that way. She makes it clear to her audience that there is the option of liberation and that one should free themselves from the negativity associated with aspects of their bodies.

In the Eating Disorder routine in NotoriousCHO, she makes a case for no longer worrying about how her body looked and was perceived. She states,

Example 9

I just wanted to be loved so from the age of 10, I became anorexic and then bulimic. And I almost died from it. Until one day I just said hey what if this is it? What if this is just what I look like and nothing I do changes that? *pause* So how much time would I save if I stop taking that extra second every time I look at myself in the mirror to call myself a big fat fuck? How much time would I save if I stopped taking an extra second every time I look at a photograph of myself to cringe over how fat I look? How much time would I save *pause* to just let myself walk by a plate glass window without sucking in my gut or throwing back my shoulders? How much time would I save? and I save 97 minutes a week, 'I can take a pottery class.' I pulled myself out of the game, stopped the game of, *uses mock white girl* 'you guys I'm on a diet, seriously.'

This transcription begins where example 7 left off and ends where example 8 begins. Besides using mock white girl prosody (but with no shift in phonetic features) when saying, 'I can take a pottery class,' in line 11 and the beginning of line 13 to line 14 with

"you guys I'm on a diet, seriously," Cho maintains her normal prosody throughout this segment of the text. This is important because Cho is not parodying anyone and instead is speaking from her genuine experiences as a fat woman, authenticating her as a speaker. She has been quoted saying that some of the best standup comedy advice that she received was from Janeane Garofalo stating, "No, they just want to see you. They just want to listen to you, they want to know what you're thinking, they want to know what you did that day. That's much more valuable than all of the jokes the boys are working out" (Kohen, 2012, back cover). Cho stated that she took that advice to heart and made her jokes as authentic as possible, which reinforces her authenticity as a speaker.

Cho indexes fat acceptance and that she may not be an ideal when she says in lines 3 to 4, "Until one day I just said hey what if this is it? What if this is just what I look like and nothing I do changes that?" This is a diametric shift in her previous indexicalizations of her body as not being good enough in examples 6 and 7 from section 5.3.1. Being accepting of one's own body is counter hegemonic at its core. She refers to dieting as "the game" and states that she stopped thinking that way, because she knew that she would never be a thin, white woman. Ending the game of hating one's body and dieting is counter hegemonic because hegemonic ideologies and ideals revolve around a capitalistic system that says, *fix yourself, make yourself desirable like thin, white models* (Durham, 2009); however, when one accepts themselves and stops trying to fix themselves, then they no longer need diet pills, fad diets, and their version of "ideal" is based less on desirability.

She continues by repeating, "how much time would I save" four times in lines 4 to 11; she provides examples three times. This rhetorical device of anaphora, in which a

speaker uses the same words at the beginning of a sentence, makes a point more convincing.[37] This usage draws attention to her behaviors which were indexically harmful to her health and did not reinforce her self-worth or self-acceptance. She refers to these acts as taking seconds (lines 4-11). Thus, indexing that these actions may have been practiced so much that they were no longer conscious or noting that these actions were very small behaviors that built up to seriously damage her self-worth. In line 11, she states that she saved 97 minutes a week, which is most likely hyperbolic for comedic effect, but taking this number at face value would mean, if each behavior only lasted a second, that she did at least one of these behaviors 5,820 times per week. In line 12, she says, "I could take a pottery class" in a mock white woman parody voice, which reinforces a comparison to white women still by saying that if she hadn't hated her fat, Asian body, and stopped comparing it to an *ideal* white body, she could have saved so much time that she could have taken a pottery class.[38] While this definitely wasn't a strong indexical connection because very few of her gestures, facial expressions, and her vowel quality didn't change in transcription, nonetheless, the indexical relationship is there (Barrett, 2017, 85).

As a fat woman and a fat liberationist, to me it is important to mention that Cho did not say that she began to love her body. In the fat liberation community, loving one's body is not necessarily part of *stickin' it to the man*. One does not have to love their body

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[37] I honestly wish that I had a citation for this, but no I just have a classics degree and we talked about this a lot when reading Cicero.

[38] Which, I guess must index white womanhood? I don't know, I'm from a crafty, hippy, artisan town…everyone takes pottery classes. Kind of a loser if you've never thrown at least a bowl.

in order to accept their body and want to be treated like a human being. This attitude contrasts to the very popular body positivity movement (or bopo for short) that has been gaining traction in the United States for at least the past five years or so (Crabbe, 2018). The body positivity movement (or what it has become) often caters to attractive, thin, white women who already have a heightened social status based on body type and race (Cooper, 2004). The body positivity movement, because of the people who have appropriated it, no longer serves the people who would benefit most from it. Instead, white, thin, already attractive people are using wellness and bopo culture to sell products (like detox teas or nutrition patches) or post before and after weight loss pictures. Instead, fat people say, *fat liberation, fat acceptance,* and *fat positivity* instead of saying that they are body positive (Cooper, 2016). Acceptance also implies that one's body should be seen as belonging to mainstream society; it is a body type, not a character flaw. In contrast, body positivity often sends messages such as, "even though I'm fat, I'm still beautiful;" a statement such as this does not accept fat bodies—instead it pathologizes fat bodies, it continues to stigmatize fat bodies (Erdman Farrell,). Because body positivity has become so mainstream, it often follows the hegemonic discourse of capitalism and wellness culture; hegemonic discourse seeks to erase the discrimination that fat people face (Crabbe, 2018).

Body positivity often invalidates the experiences of fat people by saying things like, "Have you tried just loving your body?" when fat people bring up the medical, employment, and social discrimination that fat people live with daily. Fat liberation, acceptance, and positivity state that fat people exist and whether or not they always love their bodies, they should still be allowed to freely exist in mainstream society and that

they need to change the system (Cooper, 2016). Fat positivity especially does this by making statements such as, “fat people are desirable,” “fat people are hot,” “fat people belong.” Fat positivity allows fat people to have a community and feel supported in who they are, it also counters the idea that being fat is bad. For example, the fat pool party in *Shrill* is an example of fat positivity in the media. Lizzo singing *Tempo* and twerking because *“I’m a thick bitch, I need tempo*,” is an example of fat positivity—she is indexing, “It’s okay to be fat, you deserve to have a good time.” Margaret Cho indexically promotes acceptance rather than positivity because, in my experience, one has to accept their body before they love it. Leaving the diet game is liberating.

In Cho’s 2015 performance in her Straight off the Bloat tour, she talks about being fat as a child. She continuously mentions being fat and the effects that it had on her, indexing that even though she accepts her body as it is, those are feelings that are hard to overcome. She states,

Example 10

I have a lot of tattoos I as I'm trying to avoid plastic surgery. All my friends are getting plastic surgery, I don't want to do that but I want something, you know, because I was, I'm like that, like I was a fat girl and a really fat kid fat teenager and I would always hang out with really skinny beautiful friends and we all go shopping and they buy beautiful clothes and I I would get a mug because I wanted something, so this is my reason I get tattooed. I'm just gonna keep getting tattoos and nobody even notices that I

9 have wrinkles they'll just be like oh where's that turtle

10 going.

Figure 5.25 Margaret Cho's butt with Asian Lady tattoos that look like they're talking when she twerks

This segment of her routine is called, *Tattoos Hide Wrinkles*. She first states that she is getting tattoos to hide her wrinkles, immediately indexing that wrinkles do not fit the youthful, ideal perception of beauty (line 1). However, she does not want to change the form of her body with plastic surgery; instead she wants to change her outer shell (1,2). These statement bracket differences between herself and her friends choosing to get plastic surgery. Cho then begins talking about growing up as a fat child; in this moment, she is creating solidarity with all of the fat people in the audience and then saying, "I would always hang out with really skinny beautiful friends and we all go shopping and they buy beautiful clothes and I, I would get a mug because I wanted something." In this she is again indexing an ideal physique as skinny and indexing her otherness because she was fat as a child. Yet she wanted to belong and be part of her peer group when she went to stores; this comment creates an intertextual, indexical reference to fatphobia within the

fashion industry and the discrimination and othering that Cho had to deal with within capitalist systems. To belong, Margaret bought a mug or another item that did not need to have a clothing size, she "wanted something;" however, try as she might, she was not going to fit in with her indexically attractive and desirable friends.

Next in lines six and seven, she says that she is getting tattooed and compares it to getting a mug. She is also indexing a counter-hegemonic stance towards plastic surgery to reduce the signs of aging, especially in Hollywood.[39] This comment is significant because she is again, indexing an affective stance that she accepts that she's getting older and does not mind people knowing that she'll be 54 this year on our birthday (Cho and I have the same birthday). She is still choosing to cover her wrinkles in some way, which creates a bit of a conflict in her indexical stance: Does she accept her body or not? One could make the argument that Cho is only changing the appearance of her skin, she is still going to have wrinkles even if she has a tattoo over the area. Again, Cho wants something, but she doesn't need to fall in line with the mainstream ideals of flawlessly aging.

Cho's pride in her body is also reflected when she twerks on stage (see in figure 5.25). She pulls her pants down, shows the audience her tattoo that looks like two Asian women talking, indexing both Asianness and acceptance of her body (she says that they're Asian women). She is indexing acceptance of her body because twerking is an activity where the fat jiggles on one's bottom and it is generally done in a very sexually provocative setting where women are perceived as generally confident—consider Lizzo

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[39] I actually find this stance very interesting as she has talked about how Joan Rivers was her mentor and Joan had extensive plastic surgery.

twerking to *Tempo* as an example. Twerking also implies femininity because it originated as a sexually provocative dance for women. With other indexical signs pointing towards body acceptance, Cho is most likely indexing acceptance and confidence in her Asianness, fatness and femininity.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Why does this work matter?

Each of the identities that Cho claims have been marginalized in some way. In some settings, even the thin white valley girl or mock white girl is still burdened by the unnecessary pressures of a patriarchal system (Slobe, 2018). Cho also points that out when she is liberating herself from the diet culture that white, urban women are still impressing thinness on others and still encouraging disordered eating. Each of these parodies illustrate an imbalance of power between a more privileged and a more marginalized group, but then often they intersect as well. For example, Cho's fat voice is indexically linked to white working-class folks/Appalachians as well as Black folks simultaneously. A mock white girl impression is still of a white person, just not a working-class white person; Black people are still discriminated against because of their race, as are Asian people. This is not saying that Asian folks have the same struggle as Black folks, but instead saying that both groups share race-based discrimination.

The question of how race is related to body image and what that has to do with fatness is the purpose of this thesis. I would like to, as a researcher, have a definite answer for my reader, but my answer is—it's messy. What I have gleaned from these analyses is that ideal female bodies are indexically related to whiteness, thinness, and urbanness. However, because so much of one's body composition is based on their genetics and social status is often based on one's upbringing (upward mobility is not common), ideal is a marker that is unattainable to many, if not to the majority of people (Lareau, 2003). Not having one of these traits distances a person from being ideal. In Cho's narrative style of performance, she indexes throughout that her body is not ideal as

Asian and fat. In her routines, she seems to index an epistemological stance that she knows that she is not ever going to be considered ideal and then indexes an affective stance of bodily acceptance.

While all of what I just said is pertinent to seeing how one's body in relation to their race shapes their identity, a very important discovery within this thesis was fat-voice. I was not expecting to find that Cho used a stereotypical voice that indexes Southern, Appalachian, working-class, rural, and Black folks on its indexical field. I did not at all plan to discover this indexical linkage. Once I found the indexicality of fat-voice for Cho, I started linking this to other portrayals of fat women in the media—almost all coming up the same. To be honest, I was bewildered with this finding and then I was able to link the indexicals to the way that fat people are viewed and treated. While correlation does not equal causation, it is damning evidence for the majority of fat women to be portrayed as indexically lower class, unsophisticated, unintelligent, lacking femininity, and with the continuous use of a bear or animalistic vocal quality, less than human while simultaneously in real life feeling and being treated as if they are invisible, unlovable, and undesirable. As a researcher and fat woman, I do not think that this is a coincidence. Identity is social and is based on our experiences with the world and other humans, in an ever globalizing, technologically advanced world—media plays a large role in this because many children and people experience much of the world based on what they see on television and the internet (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Durham, 2009; Goodwin & Alim, 2017). I am not saying that because fat people are often voiced with indexically Southern, rural, animalistic features that this is the reason that we face so much discrimination, but it is much easier to write off a fat person receiving poor medical

care when their doctor can blame their sinus infection on their diet; a sudden weight gain means nothing when one is already fat.

This may also be linked to the medical acceptance of disordered eating with fat patients. It's okay to cut calories by 500 per day if the person is fat, right? It's okay to tell a patient who is concerned about their hormones and sudden weight gain that they were just eating too much when they're fat, right? It's okay to tell a fat patient to just lose weight when they're having stomach pains that might actually be an ulcer or cancer, right? The way we as a society talk about fat people and fatness affects the way that fat people are viewed; according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language often shapes our view of the world. That does not mean that just because fat people are talked about as if they're animals that it means that society views fat people as animals; it just means that the language used surrounding fat people and fatness may have a meaningful impact on the way that fat people are treated.

6.2 Further Research

I was planning to leave the academy after this, but I should probably carry on my research and look at common indexical trends of Black language coinciding with fat voice based on the large base of knowledge and literature I am in possession of. I have to wonder how close mock Southern language is to Black face and subsequently how close fat voice is to black face. This is a very interesting indexical rabbit hole that I would willingly fall into. I would also like to find more voicings of fat people and find more indexical linkages, perhaps even including fat men, but definitely including more members of the LGBTQ+ community. I think that more fat narratives need to be considered in relation to research on fat people. In special education, there is the phrase, “nothing about me without me,” and I would like to carry that further into my work.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

In each scenario, whether Asianness against a white backdrop, whiteness's correlation with thinness and urbanness, or the fat-voice, Cho masterfully embodied each of these identities. Cho was a phenomenal subject for this work because she speaks with such authenticity of her experiences and characterizations. Her parodies are good enough that one can envision her gestures in one's own head, and the gestures which one envisions are the gestures and facial expressions that she's actually performing.

Fat voice is definitely a new discovery in the world of linguistics and it may be a reason that stereotypes about fatness are carried on and why fat people face so much discrimination. Fat people often know that they are stereotyped the way that they are and many people, like Cho, decide that they no longer want fatphobia and hatred of their own bodies to be part of their journey. This brings up fat liberation and fat acceptance as ways to counter the discrimination and accept that just because they are fat, it does not mean that they are less than human or animals. Which, in itself is a counter-hegemonic act.

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